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Reverse Culture Shock among Saudi Students Returning from the US to Their Homeland

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ABSTRACT

This study examines reverse acculturative stress among Saudi students returning to their home country after studying in the USA. A study on Saudi students is particularly important due to scant empirical attention on Middle Eastern students. Given the population size of returning Saudi students, it is worth analyzing their adaptation to their home country, especially as the KSA has renewed its efforts at “saudification of the workforce,” a goal that relies on a highly educated population. 96 university students participated in the study. Because of the gap in values between Saudi Arabia and the USA, the study hypothesized that Saudi returnees who reported higher levels of reverse culture shock would report lower life satisfaction and quality of life. Additionally, the study posited that students’ identification with their Saudi heritage would correlate negatively with reverse culture shock. A novel tripartite intervention model is proposed to reduce reverse culture shock.

Keywords: Culture shock, reverse culture shock, re-acculturation, international student sojourners, KASP, Saudi students, internationalization

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has recently invested a great deal in and relies upon its students who study abroad, prominently in the USA. Following the 9/11 attacks on the US World Trade Center, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and President George W. Bush agreed in 2005 to launch an international

scholarship program, in part “to improve US-Saudi relations...and reduce negative Saudi perceptions of the United States” (LeBaron & Hausheer, 2013). The program, still in existence today, seeks to develop the human capital needed to turn the Saudi economy into a knowledge-based economy.

Initially, the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) supported 6,000 students in the United States. After less than a decade, the number of Saudi students in the US exceeded 71,000 (KSA, n.d.). With the creation of the KASP, the largest endowed scholarship program ever supported by a nation-state, Saudi Arabia now has the fifth-highest number of students pursuing their education abroad after China, India, Korea, and Germany—accounting for 4% of the international student population (Pavan, 2016). The death of King Abdullah on 23 January 2015 and a steep decline in oil revenues have placed the viability of the program into question. However, despite the tightening of requirements, the total number of Saudi students studying abroad in 2015 was 207,000, including dependents who accompany them and are also supported by the government. In addition, 25% of the total 2015 budget for the KSA was still being slated for higher education (Pavan, 2016).

The 2017 appointment of the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, 31-year-old Mohammed bin Salman, popularly known as “MBS,” may indicate a new direction of economic and social reform in this highly traditional nation. As deputy crown prince, MBS was responsible for overseeing efforts to diversify the economy, a task which requires harnessing the nation’s human resources – especially women, a currently underutilized resource sector. Along these lines, MBS is promoting a plan to modernize his country and create jobs for women (Raghavan & Fahim, 2017).

According to International Consultants for Education and Fairs (ICEF), “It is hard to overstate the significance of the [KASP], both in terms of the impact on destination countries but also in its social and cultural impacts” in Saudi Arabia (Report, 2016 February 10). Al-Baadi (1982) has called the impact of modern education on the roles and status of Muslim women “unparalleled in any other cultural region in the world” (p. 4).

According to a survey published in 2013, a majority of Saudi students studying in the United States believed the KSA would undergo a major shift in the next 20 years (Mitchell, 2013). Students with such expectations may run up against a rather different reality when they return to the KSA. Several Saudi scholars have noted that the desire to retain Saudi culture while collaborating on international endeavors represents two “somewhat antithetical” objectives (Pavan, 2016, p. 94).

Overall, the goal of Saudi higher education is to merge modern education with maintaining the KSA’s historical and current emphasis on the teachings of Islam. The KSA has still not forged a clear path toward that goal by reconciling the struggle between globalization and tradition. Saudi students returning from studies abroad may be especially impacted by the failure of the KSA to balance these two viewpoints. Numerous researchers have documented the challenges for Saudi students to integrate both while they are abroad and upon their return

(Pavan, 2016, p. 95). We will now turn to a discussion of some of these challenges, beginning with some introductory remarks on the concept of acculturation.

Acculturation has been defined as “a process of adaption and change whereby a person or an ethnic, social, religious, language, or national group integrates with or adapts to the cultural values and patterns of the majority group” (Henry et al., 1996, p. 325, as cited in Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2005). Previous research has identified several acculturation strategies, ranging from assimilation (i.e., shifting from the views of one’s culture of origin to the behaviors and attitudes of their host culture) to integration (i.e., choosing to maintain one’s cultural values while attempting to join the social network of one’s host country). Two further major acculturation choices that have been discussed in the literature are marginalization (i.e., when the possibility/interest in contact with the host culture is minimal) and separation (i.e., holding on to one’s traditional views while refraining from social engaging in interaction) (Al-Krenawi & Al-Krenawi, 2022; Ward & Kennedy, 1994; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015; Aladegbaiye et al., 2021; Yerken et al., 2022).

Upon returning to their home country, sojourners face a form of re-acculturation, dubbed by Gaw (2000) as “reverse culture shock.” He defines reverse culture shock as “the process of readjusting, re-acculturating, and re-assimilating into one’s own home culture after living in a different culture” (p. 83). Conceptually, the phenomenon of reverse culture shock draws on Oberg’s (1960) application of the term “culture shock” to travel abroad, resulting in a wide range of emotional distress, including feelings of loss and confusion, in response to cultural differences between the sojourner and the host environment (Allison et al., 2012).

The concept of culture shock has received significant scholarly theorization. Perhaps the most comprehensive of these theories is the ABC model, developed by Ward et al. (2001). The ABC model covers major theoretical approaches to sojourners’ adjustment and focuses on affective, behavioral, and cognitive processes. The affective process of culture shock is considered to be rooted in the stress associated with moving to an unfamiliar location. The behavioral process, by contrast, derives from the difficulties associated with adjusting to a new cultural environment in the absence of a culturally relevant skill set. Lastly, the cognitive process encompasses psychological mechanisms involving both self-perception (i.e., social identity development) and other perceptions (i.e., intergroup relations processes).

The phenomenon of culture shock has been studied in the context of higher education particularly among international students (e.g., Yerken et al., 2022). Previous literature has shown that culture shock encompasses psychological and sociocultural dimensions (Baines et al., 2021). The former category concerns a sense of identity, mental health, and overall life satisfaction. The latter concerns the ability to cope with daily stresses at school, work, and society in general (Ward et al., 2001). Positive adaptation is considered to be instrumental and leads to successful sojourns, while negative adaptation can lead to unsuccessful sojourns (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). In the event of culture shock, the likelihood of an international student achieving a sense of identity and overall life satisfaction is

lower as compared to international students who have not experienced this shock. Similarly, the likelihood of coping with the daily stresses at school, home, and society at large is lower as compared to such peers.

In reverse culture shock, it is the difficulties of re-adapting and re-adjusting to one's own home culture after one has sojourned or lived in another cultural context that is at stake (Gaw, 2000). In the context of international students, a recent study demonstrated the presence of reverse culture shock among students returning from a six-month overseas educational program (Al-Krenawi & Al-Krenawi, 2022). Like culture shock, reverse culture shock may be related to both psychological and sociocultural adaptation. When an individual or a group experiences high levels of reverse culture shock, the likelihood of establishing a sense of identity and overall life satisfaction is low. Similarly, when an individual or a group experiences high levels of reverse culture shock, the likelihood of coping with the day-to-day stresses of social life is low. In other words, adaptation – both psychological and sociocultural – could be hindered by the strain of readjusting to one's own culture after travelling to or residing in an unfamiliar cultural setting.

Drawing on Burgoon and Hale's (1988) Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT), Mooradian (2004) has suggested that the psychological strain experienced by sojourner returnees is associated with the violation of their expectations for return and the reality of that event. Such expectations tend to be focused on the stability of interpersonal relations. Unmet expectations of continuing connection with friends or family may be coded as negative experiences. Reflecting the reality that reverses culture shock is often less anticipated than culture shock, it has been referred to as the "most difficult hurdle of international life" (Werkman, 1980, cited in Gaw, 2000, p. 86). The expectations model of reverse culture shock explains "the confrontation between individuals' expectations of reentry and the reality of the transitions" (Szkudlarek, 2010, p. 3).

Overall, scholarly literature has found that the process of cross-cultural adjustment takes the shape of a U-curve. Leung (2007) has documented that reverse culture shock for international students can result in deteriorating work performance and psychological distress due to a sense of loss over an idealized home environment. Similarly, McGrath (1998) found work environment to be a concern, in addition to changed worldviews and lifestyles, as indicated in research among 67 New Zealand university graduates who returned to their home countries for employment. Gaw (2000) noted that children and adolescents may have a more difficult time with academics as well as social withdrawal and depression after returning from a foreign country.

Given the wide gap in values and worldviews between Saudi Arabia and the US, this study aims to examine reverse culture shock among international students returning from the US to their homeland.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

What is the prevalence of reverse acculturative stress of Saudi students while readjusting to their native cultural heritage in Saudi Arabia?

H1: It was hypothesized that Saudi international students who reported higher levels of reverse culture shock would score low on various indices of psychological adaptation as measured by (a) Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985) (b) Quality of Life Questionnaire (COL-Q; Schalock & Keith, 1993) and would show higher negative affectivity compared to positive affectivity on the Affectivity Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988).

H2: Because of the stigma associated with seeking mental health care in the KSA, the marginalized status of women in the Middle East, and the greater freedom and autonomy international Saudi female students experienced while studying in the US as compared to the KSA, it was hypothesized that reverse culture shock would express itself in lower degrees of Satisfaction with Life, Quality of Life, and Negative Affectivity among Saudi females who returned to the KSA. The same measures utilized in Hypothesis 1 were adopted to examine Hypothesis 2.

H3: It was hypothesized cultural identification with a Saudi heritage culture would negatively correlate with levels of reverse culture shock, while identification with a US heritage would positively correlate with levels of reverse culture shock. That is, the higher one's identification with Saudi heritage culture, the lower the level of reverse cultural shock, and the higher one's identification with US culture, the higher the reverse culture shock. Culture shock was measured by the loss dimension (six items), and cultural identification was measured by the Acculturation Index (AI) developed by Ward and Kennedy (1994).

METHOD

The 96 students in the sample ranged in age from 23 to 41 years, with a mean of 30.22 as indicated in Table 1. The sample consisted of 58.3% females and 41.7% males. Just over 40% had completed their bachelor's degree, while just over half had completed a master's degree, and 6.3% had completed a doctorate. The students had all returned to Saudi Arabia between 2013 and 2018, with the largest number (N=20) returning in 2015 and the smallest (N=10) returning in 2014. The average stay in the United States for the sample was 4.5 years.

Research Instruments

Reverse culture shock. The Seiter and Waddell (1989) Reentry Shock Scale was designed to measure reverse culture shock. The 16-item questionnaire has been widely used in studying reverse culture shock in psychological research literature (Gaw, 2000). Participants rate their degrees of cultural shock using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (no difficulty) to 5 (extreme difficulty). According to Presbitero (2016), the Reentry Shock Scale has satisfactory psychometric features, with Cronbach's Alpha at 0.80. Examples of the items of this measure include statements such as "When I returned home people did not seem that much interested in my experiences abroad."

Life Satisfaction. The study used one of the most common measures of Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985). This Likert-type measure is made up of five questions rated on a 1-to-7 rating scale, with higher scores suggesting a higher level of life satisfaction. A sample of these items includes the following: “In most ways, my life is close to my ideals”; “I am satisfied with my life”; “If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.” Studies by Pavot and Diener (1993, 2008) document satisfactory psychometric results for this scale, including good internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and construct validity.

Table 1: General information for the sample study

| Item | Frequency | Percent |
|--|-----------|---------|
| Age (N=96) | | |
| 23-25 | 20 | 20.8 |
| 26-30 | 33 | 34.4 |
| 31-35 | 24 | 25.0 |
| 36-41 | 19 | 19.8 |
| Gender (N=96) | | |
| Male | 40 | 41.7 |
| Female | 56 | 58.3 |
| Highest Degree Obtained (N=96) | | |
| | Frequency | Percent |
| Bachelors | 40 | 41.7 |
| Masters | 50 | 52.1 |
| Doctorate | 6 | 6.3 |
| Year returned to Saudi Arabia (N=96) | | |
| 2013 | 13 | 13.5 |
| 2014 | 10 | 10.4 |
| 2015 | 20 | 20.8 |
| 2016 | 17 | 17.7 |
| 2017 | 18 | 18.8 |
| 2018 | 18 | 18.8 |
| Total years spent in the United States (N=96) | | |
| 2 | 8 | 8.3 |
| 3 | 19 | 19.8 |
| 4 | 21 | 21.9 |
| 5 | 25 | 26.0 |
| 6 | 14 | 14.6 |
| 7 | 9 | 9.4 |

Quality of Life Questionnaire (QOL-Q). QOL-Q has been utilized in a large number of studies to assess the quality of life. Its psychometric properties have been evaluated by Schalock and Keith (1993), Rapley and Lobley (1995),

Kober and Eggleton (2002), and Caballo et al. (2005). It has been used with Anglo-Saxon communities (Schallock and Keith 1993; Rapley and Lobley 1995; Kober and Eggleton, 2002) and Spanish-speaking cultures. Studies from various international communities suggest that its use with communities from Saudi Arabia will also be reliable. Quality of life domains measured by the QOL-Q include satisfaction, competence/productivity, empowerment/independence, social belonging, and community integration.

The Acculturation Index (AI). The Acculturation Index (AI) (Ward and Kennedy, 1994) was designed to determine the subjects' attitudes toward both their host and home cultures. This 5-item Likert-type questionnaire is recommended for international students by Stoessel et al. (2012) since sojourners "belong to both cultural groups simultaneously" (p. 145). The AI assesses both cognitive and behavioral dimensions by asking participants two questions: "How similar are your experiences and behaviors to those of people sharing your culture of origin?" and "How similar are your experiences and behaviors to those of the people of your host culture?" A subject's score reflects cultural identification and attachment with his or her native culture (CNI) and cultural identification associated with the new culture (HNI). Cronbach's alphas were .95 for CNI and .93 for HNI.

Psychological Affect. The expanded form of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS-X) was utilized for this study. While the original Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) used two 10-item scales to measure PA and NA, the PANAS-X uses 60 items to measure 11 specific effects: fear, sadness, guilt, hostility, shyness, fatigue, surprise, joviality, self-assurance, attentiveness, and serenity. The 60 items can usually be completed in 10 minutes or less (Watson & Clark, 1999). Instructions request that subjects evaluate the extent to which they experienced various emotions over the past few weeks. A 5-point Likert scale which varies from 1 (Very slightly or not at all) to 5 (Extremely) is used to collect the data. Alphas for the current sample were Positive Activation .832 and Negative Activation .858.

Procedure

All participants for this study were recruited through the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission (SACM), located in Fairfax, Virginia. As an organization, the SACM strives to provide Saudi students with "the best possible educational opportunities" and serves as "an intermediary between US educational institutions and the Kingdom" in matters of science, culture, and education (KSA Ministry of Education, 2013). Established in 1951 in New York City, the SACM moved to several locations in the US before settling in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., in 1984. In 2016, the United States hosted the greatest number of overseas Saudi students worldwide, a total of 125,000, including those on scholarship and others studying at their own expense (US Has Most, 2016).

The SACM has a databank of all alumni who completed their studies in the US, including their emails, contact numbers in Saudi Arabia, and place of

residence. After obtaining the list of returnees from the SACM, the researcher sent a letter to returnees to elicit their participation in this study. A list of potential participants who provided a signed consent form to volunteer and participate in this study was compiled based on sociodemographic background data such as gender, age, year of returning to Saudi Arabia, and type of degree obtained (undergraduate, master, or doctoral level). To increase the representation of all Saudi returnees, a stratified sampling method was implemented based on gender, level of education (graduate and undergraduate), and seven types of majors completed in the U.S. These majors included business, psychology and education, medicine, humanities, social sciences, and allied health.

A random sample of undergraduate and graduate returnees was selected from each stratum. In addition, undergraduate and graduate female and male students were recruited randomly. All potential participants were selected based on the following selection criteria: Each participant must be a Saudi Arabian student returnee, have completed his or her degree, and—to rule out the impact of elapse of memory that will impact the objectivity of the study—the returnee must have returned to Saudi Arabia within the past three years. The participants were instructed about confidentiality measures adopted to protect their privacy, and they were also instructed that their email addresses and names would be deleted upon receiving their return online package.

Potential participants were informed of the background of the researcher and that the study had obtained Howard University IRB approval. Participants were requested to complete an online package of surveys emailed to them in Arabic language. The package consisted of the Reentry Shock Scale developed by Seiter and Waddell (1989), the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985), the QOL-Q (Schlock & Keith, 1993), the Acculturation Index (AI) developed by Ward and Kennedy (1994), the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS-X), and a short, anonymous sociodemographic questionnaire.

RESULTS

To measure the prevalence of reverse culture shock, the subjects were presented with a series of six statements about their feelings upon returning to Saudi Arabia as depicted in Table 2. These statements dealt with depression, social connections, and purposeful living. An average of 19.33 subjects (20.1%) slightly agreed with the statements, an average of 30.83 (32.1%) agreed, and an average of 22 (22.9%) strongly agreed, meaning that 72 of the 96 subjects had some kind of adverse reaction after returning to Saudi Arabia, for a total of 75%. Given that Sussman (2000) suggested that “near ubiquitous distress” is experienced during repatriation (p. 355), these findings are not surprising.

Table 2: Measures of Reverse Culture Shock

| Response | Q1 | | Q2 | | Q3 | | Q4 | | Q5 | | Q6 | |
|----------------------------|----|------|----|------|----|------|----|------|----|------|----|------|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Strongly disagree | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 1 | 1.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 2 | 2.1 | 3 | 3.1 |
| Disagree | 6 | 6.3 | 1 | 1.0 | 3 | 3.1 | 5 | 5.2 | 5 | 5.2 | 7 | 7.3 |
| Slightly disagree | 8 | 8.3 | 4 | 4.2 | 8 | 8.3 | 10 | 10.4 | 5 | 5.2 | 7 | 7.3 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 5 | 5.2 | 9 | 9.4 | 10 | 10.4 | 17 | 17.7 | 14 | 14.6 | 13 | 13.5 |
| Slightly agree | 19 | 19.8 | 15 | 15.6 | 18 | 18.8 | 20 | 20.8 | 28 | 29.2 | 16 | 16.7 |
| Agree | 34 | 35.4 | 46 | 47.9 | 29 | 30.2 | 23 | 24.0 | 24 | 25.0 | 29 | 30.2 |
| Strongly agree | 24 | 25.0 | 21 | 21.9 | 27 | 28.1 | 21 | 21.9 | 18 | 18.8 | 21 | 21.9 |

Table 3: Correlations among Variables for Reverse Culture Shock

| | | Positive Affect Schedule | Negative Affect Schedule | Satisfaction with Life | Quality of life |
|------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|-----------------|
| Feelings of Loss | Pearson Correlation | -0.310 | 0.295 | -0.452 | -0.48 |
| | <i>t-test</i> | -3.161 | 2.993 | -4.913 | -5.305 |
| | <i>P-value</i> | 0.001* | 0.0035* | < 0.0001* | < 0.0001* |
| | <i>N</i> | 96 | 96 | 96 | 96 |

* The correlation is statistically significant at a 0.05 level

H1. It was hypothesized that Saudi international students who reported greater problems in readjustment shock would score lower on various indices of psychological adaptation as measured by (a) Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985) and (b) Quality of Life Questionnaire (COL-Q; Schalock &

Keith, 1993) and would show higher negative affectivity compared to positive on the Affectivity Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988).

As shown in Table 3, data analysis indicated that higher reverse cultural shock scores were significantly associated with low Positive Affect Schedule, ($r = 0.295, p = 0.0035$), low Satisfaction with Life, ($r = -0.452, p < 0.0001$), and low Quality of Life, ($r = -0.480, p < 0.0001$). This result indicates that greater problems in readjustment shock were negatively related to the Positive Affect Schedule, Satisfaction with Life, and Quality of life. However, as expected, the results indicated that greater problems in readjustment shock were positively related to the Negative Affect Schedule, $r = 0.295, p = 0.0035$.

H2. Because of the stigma associated with seeking mental health care in the KSA, the marginalized status of women in the Middle East, and the greater freedom and autonomy international Saudi female students experienced while studying in the US as compared to the KSA, it was hypothesized that reverse culture shock would express itself in lower degrees of Satisfaction with Life, Quality of Life, and Negative Affectivity among Saudi females who had returned to the KSA. The same measures utilized in Hypothesis 1 were adapted to examine Hypothesis 2.

Reverse cultural shock. Results indicated there was a significant difference in the mean of reverse cultural shock between males (4.48) and females (5.15), with the value of the T-test equaling 3.051, and with p-value equaling 0.001.

Positive Affectivity. The means for the Negative Affect Schedule for males and females equal 2.09 and 1.57, respectively. The value of the T-test equaled 6.933, with a p-value less than 0.0001, showing that female student returnees scored significantly lower on negative affectivity compared to male student returnees. In addition, T-test results revealed that the scores of males on the Positive Affectivity Schedule were significantly greater than those obtained for females.

Negative Affectivity. Results indicated that the means for Negative Affect Schedule for males and females were 4.03 and 3.74, respectively. The value of the T-test equaled 2.561, with a p-value equaling 0.006, confirming sufficient evidence to conclude that the mean of the Negative Affect Schedule is significantly different between males and females, not favoring females. In other words, the mean of the Negative Affect Schedule for females was significantly greater than the Negative Affect Schedule for males.

Life Satisfaction. The results regarding satisfaction with life also revealed sufficient evidence to conclude that mean scores on life satisfaction differed significantly between males and females. The value of the T-test equaled 2.122, with a p-value equaling 0.0182; the mean scores of 1.95 for males and 1.79 for females suggest that female returnee students experience less life satisfaction compared to male returnees.

Quality of life. As expected, results showed that female student returnees experienced a significantly poorer quality of life compared to male returnees. The value of the T-test equaled 1.88, with a p-value equaling 0.032. These results are depicted in Table 4.

H3: It was hypothesized that cultural identification with Saudi heritage would negatively correlate with the level of culture shock, while identification with a US heritage would positively correlate with the level of culture shock. That is, the higher the identification with Saudi heritage culture, the lower the level of cultural shock; conversely, the higher the identification with US culture, the greater the culture shock.

Reverse culture shock was measured by Feelings of Loss dimensions (6 items), and cultural identification was measured by the Acculturation Index (AI) developed by Ward and Kennedy (1994).

The results indicated a significant relationship between identification with Saudi heritage culture and the level of reverse cultural shock experienced by participants ($r = -0.192, p = 0.030$). However, the results showed an insignificant correlation between identification with the US host culture and the level of reverse culture shock ($r = 0.315, p = 0.001$).

Table 4: Results of Independent Samples T-Tests for Reverse Culture Shock

| Variable | Gender | N | Mean | Standard Deviation | Standard Error Mean | t-test | P-value |
|--------------------------|--------|----|------|--------------------|---------------------|--------|-----------|
| Feelings of Loss | Male | 40 | 4.48 | 1.2 | 0.190 | -3.051 | 0.001* |
| | Female | 56 | 5.15 | 0.95 | 0.127 | | |
| Positive Affect Schedule | Male | 40 | 2.09 | 0.26 | 0.041 | 6.933 | < 0.0001* |
| | Female | 56 | 1.57 | 0.42 | 0.056 | | |
| Negative Affect Schedule | Male | 40 | 3.74 | 0.57 | 0.090 | 2.561 | 0.006* |
| | Female | 56 | 4.03 | 0.53 | 0.071 | | |
| Satisfaction with Life | Male | 40 | 1.95 | 0.37 | 0.059 | 2.122 | 0.0182* |
| | Female | 56 | 1.79 | 0.36 | 0.048 | | |
| Quality of life | Male | 40 | 1.84 | 0.38 | 0.060 | 1.88 | 0.032* |
| | Female | 56 | 1.70 | 0.33 | 0.041 | | |

* The correlation is statistically significant at a 0.05 level

DISCUSSION

Hypothesis 1 predicted that Saudi students who reported greater problems with reverse culture shock as measured by their agreement with the “Feelings of Loss” statements would suffer from lower satisfaction with life, lower quality of life, and higher negative affect. The study supported this hypothesis.

The study also established a link between the scores on reverse culture shock and the level of life satisfaction these returnee students experience. More cognitively oriented than other dimensions of happiness, life satisfaction remains one of its components. The other component of happiness is joy. According to Argyle (2001), joy is the emotional part of happiness, while life satisfaction is the cognitive part, “a reflective appraisal, a judgment [sic], of how well things are going, and have been going” (p. 39).

The current study has also established the link between participants’ scores on reverse culture shock and scores on quality of life. The higher the scores students obtained on reverse culture shock, the poorer their quality of life. Quality of life (QOL) has both an objective and a subjective component. Human needs include the basic needs for food, freedom, security, and so on, while subjective well-being encompasses happiness, utility, welfare, and life satisfaction. Data analysis also showed that the higher the scores participants received on reverse culture shock, the higher their scores on negative effects having to do with unpleasant feelings.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that female Saudi students would have lower scores on the life satisfaction scale and quality of life scale and higher scores on the negative affect scale than their male counterparts with similar scores on reverse acculturative stress measurements (depression, social connections, and purposeful living). This hypothesis was supported by the results. These results are in line with findings by Goforth et al. (2016), who studied acculturative stress on Arab American adolescents. The authors found that females had higher internalizing symptoms, such as crying and guilt, compared to their male counterparts.

There are several possible explanations for why Saudi female students tend to experience greater reverse culture shock than their male counterparts when they attend school in the US. One reason concerns the wearing of traditional dress, which can mark them as “other” in the host country, while their male counterparts, who do not generally wear traditional dress in the host country, are more likely to go unnoticed. In the US, women generally make their own decisions regarding their manner of dress, course of study, and professional trajectory. This study has demonstrated that when female Saudi students have experienced/witnessed the relative freedom that women in the US enjoy, upon their return to Saudi Arabia they experience reverse acculturative stress to a greater degree than returning male Saudi Arabian students.

Although strictures against Saudi women in their country of origin are being somewhat reduced around the fringes (women can now drive cars, for example), returning to a country that has separate educational and workplace facilities for men and women might seem stifling to female Saudi returnees. Partly

due to workplace restrictions (Al-Baadi, 1982), women represented just 0.8% of the private sector workforce in 2010. Notably, however, the number of women employed in Saudi Arabia has increased by almost 50% since 2010. Nonetheless, they still represent just 16% of the total Saudi workforce. There are now 600,000 Saudi women working in the private sector, up from 90,000 in 2011. Equity, however, is still a far-off ideal.

Regarding the final hypothesis, the findings shed light on the relationship between ethnic identification and reverse culture shock. Studies indicate that ethnic identity is a rather stable trait, as Waters (1990) and other researchers have documented. A strong sense of ethnic identity is reinforced by family background, old friends, and neighborhood context. Empirical research also provides strong evidence that individuals seek to hold a coherent and stable self-concept, which could keep the individual from discarding the group membership. The current study found a negative relationship, showing that identification with subjects' ethnic identity tends to buffer them from the stress of reverse culture shock. The experiences of reverse culture shock did not threaten their ethnic identity. Moreover, it revealed the opposite trend for those students who did not continue to manage their ethnicity in the old, familiar way. Thus, subjects who formed ties and had higher cultural identification with the US host experienced higher reverse culture shock as compared to those who formed fewer such ties and had less such identification.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Cultural reentry is a complex and potentially fraught experience. This can be especially so for international sojourner students, who oftentimes leave behind their home countries for radically different host environments – and then return to changed circumstances and changed selves. Reflecting this destabilizing potential, Pritchard (2011) discussed the event in terms of “trauma” (p. 93). Organizing and managing such return, in the broad sense of taking into account psychological, social, and cognitive spheres, requires knowledge of reverse culture shock, and clear guidelines on how to effectively address it and buffer from reverse culture shock provoking stress.

Reverse culture shock is a process: it tends to “creep up” on returnees, who may exhibit signs of this phenomenon over the year of return rather than immediately upon re-entry to their home countries (Pritchard, 2011). Initial lack of distress, then, should not be interpreted by either institutions or individuals as the final chapter in the re-entry story – instead, it ought to be viewed as one part of an unfolding drama of re-acculturation. Oftentimes, individuals who experience reverse culture shock have had no outlet for discussing their time abroad. Following Beardmore et al. (2008), we recommend that schools establish forums for returnees to discuss the sojourn. Such forums might be particularly effective in a group framework, as Thomas (2009) found that issues around the reentry process were predominantly social. We elaborate on forums for reentering students below, in the broader context of a proposed training model which is designed to reduce both culture shock and reverse culture shock in this population.

In terms of a temporal structure for intervention, it appears that before, during, and after the sojourn are *all* important times to contact students in programs (Beardmore et al., 2008). Thus, this research suggests that schools establish a tripartite training model which consists of the following three intervention parts: (1) preparation programming in which students are guided to discuss anticipatory concerns about the sojourn and in which moderators present the phenomenon and symptoms of culture shock and reverse culture shock, (2) interim programming in which students are helped to identify and discuss their distress during the sojourn, and (3) reentry programming that includes two distinct segments: the first focusing on reentry preparation (to be offered while the student is still in the host country) and the second focusing on post-sojourn reverse culture shock-related challenges (to be offered upon return to host country). This suggestion resonates with Allison et al. (2012), who found that students (n=19) returning from educationally based “expeditions” benefited from both pre-and post-expedition training. Following these authors, we further propose that, in this training, moderators specifically guide students to discuss issues of isolation upon return and ways to apply newly gained knowledge and awareness to their home environments. In this vein, it is worth mentioning that helping reentering students to develop self-reflexivity about what has changed *within themselves* before, during, and after the sojourn is a valuable goal in the context of the proposed training program (Butcher, 2002).

Relatedly, this research has attempted to stress that *proactivity* is a crucial aspect of program design in reducing reverse culture shock for student returnees. Gaw’s (2000) finding that returning student sojourners who experienced higher levels of culture shock accessed *fewer* student support services than the lower culture shock comparison group indicates the need for institutions to build our proposed tripartite intervention model into the fabric of their program design for student sojourners. In other words, rather than waiting for distressed sojourner students to seek help – which research has shown they may not do – we recommend that institutions actively initiate contact with all sojourner students. Furthermore, and drawing on Gaw’s (2000) suggestion that reentering students in distress may doubt school professionals’ ability to be helpful due to an assumed lack of sojourner experience, we recommend that the professionals involved in such outreach programs signal to such students their awareness of the specific challenges entailed by reverse culture shock.

Le and LaCost (2017) identified reentry as overlooked in the literature on international students. In their study of “repatriating” (reentering) Vietnamese international students (n=7), they found that interpersonal relationships and professional opportunities were the main areas in which subjects reported losses related to reverse culture shock. In line with our study, the losses were felt particularly acutely by female returnees. Specifically, several female subjects described difficulty coping with conservative traditional gender norms upon their return – a feature that corresponds to the Saudi students’ reentry experiences. Additionally, in agreement with the current study, some subjects reported a strong and uncomfortable sense of being generally out of sync with the conservative cultural ethos of the home country environment upon return. Such findings were

echoed in the work of Pritchard (2010), who investigated the reentry of Taiwanese and Sri Lankan students after studying in Western countries and found tension mainly around the constructs of (1) traditionalism vs. modernism, and (2) collectivism vs. individualism. In light of the enduring – albeit slightly shifting – conservative traditional ethos in Saudi Arabia, we recommend that organizers of student sojourns build into all three parts of the aforementioned tripartite model guided discussions on dealing with gender- and tradition-related expectations that differ between home and host communities.

Our final suggestion for the reduction of reverse culture shock among international returnee students is that student sojourner programs work to develop strong relations between home- and host-country environments. Pritchard (2011) notes the significant amounts spent by the Sri Lankan government on the sojourner students' Western education and proposes that it might make more strategic efforts to maximize its gains from the investment. As we discussed at the beginning of the present article, international students in general, and KSAP students in particular, have brought billions of study dollars to the US. It is clearly in the best interests of both host and home governments to make intensive efforts to reap the benefits of such a massive investment of resources. In this regard, we view our tripartite model of intervention as a bridging mechanism geared to be developed and executed in mutual coordination with both the home and the host institutions.

LIMITATIONS

The current study is limited, and thus its findings must be approached with caution. As this is a cross-sectional study, the reported results are only correlational and do not address continuities and changes over time. Longitudinal studies are needed to assess the continuities and discontinuities of the impact of reverse cultural shock. Future studies that combine quantitative and qualitative (mixed method design) methods provide a richness of questions about reverse culture shock, reverse acculturation, and adaptation. Additionally, data was collected using self-administered measures. Although the instruments are validated measures, data collected from subjects are likely to be impacted by socially desirable responses; thus, a challenge to internal validity exists. Finally, although this self-reported information is valuable, there are no previous studies that documented reverse culture shock in this community to compare and contrast trends and findings. This study should be considered as a preliminary study, or baseline data for future studies. Additionally, future studies should incorporate additional data from qualitative measures, such as interviews, to overcome some of these limitations and yield findings with enhanced validity with increased generalizability to the target population.

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Some sections, with minimal or no editing

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