Acculturative stress among non-western female students in the west: The female Arabian case

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ABSTRACT

The past fifteen years have seen a surge in Arab international students studying in Western Colleges and Universities, many of whom are females. While the Saudi Arabian sojourner student population has received much media coverage thanks to the KASP national scholarship program, students from many other Arab states are also arriving in the West. As the scholarly literature on the experiences of these students remains extremely sparse, we aim to address this gap by examining four different areas of research through the context of acculturative stress among female Arab students in western institutions of higher education: (1) mixed-gender academic settings; (2) language barriers; (3) discrimination; (4) approaches to academic problems, and (5) presence/absence of family. We conclude the article by offering our recommendations on applying care and treatment of acculturative stress among female Arab students through the framework of group relations with the immediate and extended families, as well as the broader group of religious co-practitioners.

Key words: Acculturative stress, non-western, group relations, Arab-female, cross-cultural.

INTRODUCTION

International student mobility is a burgeoning phenomenon. Record numbers of international students continue to flock to the United States for higher education (Lefaldh-Davis and Perrone-McGovern, 2015). Alongside this traditional study-abroad destination, other English-speaking regions such as the UK, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, are recruiting and receiving students from across the world. European colleges and universities, too, have become highly sought-after hosts to the global student population. Sojourner students bring with them an array of benefits: global knowledge and experience, diversity, and, not least, money. In the light of the intensified recruitment efforts being made in the West to draw a globally diverse student body, scholars have signaled the need for a better understanding of acculturation stress among international students (Schwartz et al., 2010).

The present article aims to examine acculturative stress among female Arab students in the West. It is structured as follows. First, we offer a brief overview of recent developments in the international student population, highlighting the female cohort. Next, we define the term “acculturation” and consider a range of scholarly views on the topic of acculturative stress. The main section, which immediately follows, presents existing research on acculturative stress experienced by non-western Arab women studying in western institutions of higher education. We conclude with recommendations and implications for future research.

One of the fastest-growing populations of international students is Saudi Arabian (Lefaldh-Davis and Perrone-McGovern, 2015). The national scholarship program, the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, is fueling this surge. Since its inception, the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) has funded more than one hundred thousand Saudi
students’ international educations (Naffee, 2014). With respect to Saudi students in the United States, Taylor and Albasri (2014) reported that almost every family in Saudi Arabia has at least one family member in the program (McMurtie, 2014, cited in Taylor and Albasri, 2014). Saudi Arabia now ranks fourth for total number of international students studying in the United States, behind only South Korea, China, and India (Lefdal-Davis and Perrone-McGovern, 2015). But a wide range of Arab countries are represented as well. For example, Abu Rabia (2017) noted that in 2014, 92,618 Arab international students – most of whom were from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia – were studying in the United States (Institute of International Education, 2014, cited in Abu Rabia, 2017). Jordan, too, is sending students (Alazzi and Chiodo, 2006). And the list goes on. Broadening the geographic lens, there has been a major uptick in students from the Gulf region (e.g., Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) studying in Australia (Clerenhan et al., 2011; Gauntlett, 2018). Students from the Arab world are also choosing Canada (Alqudayri and Gounko, 2018), England (Brown, 2009) and a multitude of other western venues as study destinations.

Female international students from the Arab regions constitute a new and intriguing case. Until recently, this sector made up a minuscule percentage of sojourning students from the Arab lands. But the tide is turning in a dramatic way. Thus, women from the Arab regions are filling institutions of higher education in the United States, Canada, and throughout the West (Yakabski et al., 2018; Young and Clark, 2017; Alqefari, 2015; Alhazmi, 2010; Gauntlett, 2006; Alqudayri and Gounko, 2018, Hanassab, 2006, Sandekian et al., 2015, Brown, 2009). Moreover, these women are earning both undergraduate and graduate degrees. To take but a single recent example, as of the year 2017, nearly half (42%) of Saudi students in doctoral programs in western universities (5,165 individuals) were women (Saudi Ministry of Education, cited in Alqudayri and Gounko, 2018).

International students face unique challenges in crossing national boundaries. According to Raksha (2002), these challenges involve tangible losses (e.g., family and friends) as well as intangible ones (e.g., sense of belonging, personal efficacy, and knowledge to navigate the cultural context). Such students often find themselves juggling language difficulties, tight finances, and loneliness (Heggins and Jackson, 2003; Johnson and Sandhu, 2007). Additionally, sojourner students from the Arab world generally, and from Saudi Arabia in particular, are subject to special scrutiny in light of the tragic events of 9/11. Particularly pertinent to the current study, female students from this region may confront challenges with respect to veiling and mixed-gender study environments. All these factors can lead to acculturative stress and compromised mental health (Berry, 1997; Zhang and Goodson, 2011).

Despite their increasing numbers and the different obstacles they face, international students from the Middle East have been the focus of few research studies. Their specific acculturation challenges, including acculturative stress and associated mental health issues, have been rather overlooked in the literature. Moreover, the few studies that have been done have focused on male Arab students. This can be partially accounted for by the fact that, only recently, female Arab students comprised a significant percentage of international students. In any event, the particular needs and circumstances of female Arab students in western universities have thus far received scant scholarly attention.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The 2014 Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange found that the number of international students at colleges and universities in the United States rose to another record as high as 886,052 students during the 2013-2014 academic year, while US students studying abroad increased by 3% to an all-time high of more than 289,000 in 2012-2013 (the last year for which data are available). The total number of foreign students is nearly double what it was a decade ago, representing 4.2% of all college students (Schoof, 2014). In 2013-2014, 54,000 Saudi students were studying in US colleges or universities, an increase of 21% over the previous year (Schoof, 2014). With education spending accounting for 25% of the Saudi Arabia's public spending for the year 2013, a total of around 111,000 Saudis are now studying in the United States ("Number of Saudi Students," 2014).

Foreign students contribute significantly to host countries' economies. For example, the US Department of Commerce estimates that international students brought $22.7 billion to the US economy in 2011 ("Number of Saudi Students," 2014). With figures like these, it is hardly surprising that researchers have sought to better understand how to reduce the acculturative stress of sojourner students.

Before delving into the issue of acculturative stress, the concept of acculturation, in their classic formulation, Redfield et al. (1936) wrote that acculturation can be defined as "those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups" (Miller et al., 2011: 346). Following this line of thought, Berry et al. (1987) suggest that acculturative stress is a "physiological and psychological state of distress brought about by culture-specific stressors rooted in the process of acculturation" (cited in Miller et al., 2011: 348). These stressors can include problems in learning new social norms, intergenerational family tensions, lack of cultural
diversity in the community, language difficulties, and differences in values and worldviews.

In this vein, scholars have studied stressors “related to transitioning and adapting to a new environment,” including “linguistic difficulties, pressures to assimilate, separation from family, experiences with discrimination, and intergenerational conflicts” (Ahmed et al., 2011: 182; Lazarus, 1997: 41). Similarly, Sandhu and Asraban (1994) argued that a build-up of social and practical problems for immigrants may yield acculturative stress, that is, “the disorientation that often accompanies cross-cultural transitions” (as cited in Yakunina et al., 2013: 216). According to Sam and Berry (2006), such stress can be present in the form of emotional and psychosomatic symptoms (Kalek et al., 2010). Johnson and Sandhu (2007) reported that acculturative stress can produce, among other symptoms, anxiety, sadness, and cultural confusion (Yakunina et al., 2013: 216). Regarding psychosomatic symptoms, Chataway and Berry (1989) found lower mental and physical health among Chinese students than among French-Canadian and English-Canadian students, all of whom had moved to study at Queens University at Kingston, Ontario. Rahe (1974) reported that “an individual’s score for stressful life events was correlated only minimally (r =1) with the development of illness” (p. 296).

Several acculturative stress models have emphasized the complex interrelationship between attitudes toward one's heritage culture and that of one's culture of origin. Thus, Ahmed et al. (2011) proposed that “psychosocial adjustment is related to the interplay between immigrants' attitudes towards their culture of origin and their host culture” (p. 182). In this light, Berry (1997, 2001) outlined four fundamental acculturative strategies: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. Following Berry (1990), Eshel and Rosenthal-Sokolov (2000) elaborated on these four basic acculturation strategies:

(a) Separation, a wish to retain the previous cultural identity and refrain from close interaction with the new culture;
(b) Integration, a balance between maintaining the original identity and interacting with the new culture and adopting some of its ways;
(c) Assimilation, abandoning a great part of the old identity and adopting a new lifestyle; and
(d) Marginalization, a lack of interest or ability either to retain previous identity or to develop a new one. (pp. 677-78)

Eshel and Rosenthal-Sokolov (2000) found that, for sojourners studying in Israel, a “preference for integration strategy was most directly associated with measures of adjustment” (p. 687). Kurman et al. (2005), in their study, reported that integration was the optimal attitude for cross-cultural adaptation. Furthermore, in a study that covered 13 immigrant-receiving countries, Berry et al. (2006) showed that integration was the strategy most likely to be associated with psychosocial health. These results on integration strategies received further support in the work of Kalek et al. (2010).

For the most part, research on acculturative stress has centered on external displacement within multicultural societies (Ahmed, Kia-Keating and Tsai, 2011; Berry, 1997; Berry, Phinney et al., 2006; Chataway and Berry, 1989; Kalek et al., 2010; Riedel, Wisemann and Hannich, 2011; Sirin et al., 2013; Wei et al., 2012; Yakunina et al., 2013). Absolutely, J.W. Berry, a pioneer in the field of acculturation psychology, considered multiculturalism so pivotal to the project of integration that he made it a fundamental element of his discussion on the topic: "The integration strategy can only be pursued in societies that are explicitly multicultural" [emphasis in original] (Berry and Kalin, 1995; Berry, 1997; Berry, 2001).

Subsequent studies have drawn on Berry's four-part acculturation paradigm. For example, Kurman et al. (2005) studied Jewish-Ethiopian students and Israeli-Arab students in Israel. They hypothesized that an attitude of separation for Ethiopians deviating from the in-group would negatively affect psychological adjustment. An attitude of assimilation among Arabs, by contrast, would have the opposite result, since the Arab in-group would opt for separation. These hypotheses were confirmed in the study.

Kosic (2002) aimed to investigate the relation between acculturation and what Searle and Ward (1990) termed "psychological and sociocultural adaptation." For Searle and Ward, psychological adaptation refers to mental and physical wellbeing, whereas sociocultural adaptation emphasizes the capability to organize one's daily life in a new context (e.g., language ability, cultural knowledge, social relationships) (as cited in Kosic, 2002: 180). Kosic (2002) partially validates Berry's model but reports no differences in adaptation levels between integrated and assimilated immigrants from Poland and Croatia to Italy.

Berry (2001) affirmed the importance of social and individual factors for determining acculturative stress. Ahmed et al. (2011) theorized about a group of Arab-American adolescents that "cultural resources may counteract the effect of these adversities [acculturative stressors] by serving a protective role, or they may play a promotive role by having a direct positive effect on psychological health" (p. 182). These cultural resources include ethnic identity, religious identity, and religious support. Ethnic identity refers to one's "sense of membership and belonging to an ethnic group" (p. 183). Religious identity was measured by religious coping mechanisms associated with a higher being (e.g., prayer), religious support from or by God, and support from congregations and congregation leaders (p. 185). Similarly,
religious support was said to derive “from members, leaders, or clergy in the congregations” (p. 183). Not surprisingly, cultural resources were “negatively related to psychological distress” (p. 189).

Individual coping mechanisms can also serve to reduce acculturative stress. Chataway and Berry (1989) measured eight of such mechanisms: (1) problem-solving, (2) wishful thinking, (3) detachment, (4) social support, (5) positive thinking, (6) self-blame, (7) tension reduction, and (8) withdrawal. Folkman et al. (1986) highlighted two broad categories of individual coping strategies: the first is problem-focused coping, including aggressive interpersonal efforts and deliberate strategies to problem-solve; the second category is emotion-focused coping (cited in Kalek et al., 2010).

Along these lines, the trait of forbearance has been examined as an individual coping mechanism. In the Chinese case, for example, this trait has been described as a “coping strategy that refers to the minimization or concealment of problems or concerns in order to maintain social harmony and not trouble or burden others” (Wei et al., 2012: 98). Wei et al. (2012) explored forbearance and other moderating variables, such as identification of cultural heritage, on acculturative stress. They found a “significant three-way interaction of forbearance coping, identification with heritage culture, and acculturative stress in predicting psychological distress” (p. 102). Similarly, researchers have argued that Arab students may deploy the traits of patience (saber) and endurance (tahammol) in individual coping. According to Aib-Hashem (2008), some of these pupils may have become accustomed to unpredictability over time, and thus might not experience the degree of frustration felt by those in more affluent societies when confronted with life struggles.

Other individual traits that have been studied in the context of acculturative stress are hardiness, that is, one’s general view of persistence and optimism, and “universal-diverse orientation,” that is, one’s ability to approach similarities and differences with appreciation (Yakunina et al., 2013: 217). While all such personal growth efforts have been found to help international students overcome acculturative stress, with respect to adjustment, hardiness has been found to have the most direct positive effect (Yakunina et al., 2013). Self-esteem, too, can impact on acculturative stress. Although self-esteem can be negatively affected by acculturative stress, it has been reported that high self-esteem can serve as a buffer to such detrimental impact (Kim et al., 2014).

Friends and family, too, play a part in acculturative stress. In their study, Xu and Chi (2013) found higher rates of depression among US-born participants than among Asian immigrants. Their results are in line with an established body of research (Sue et al., 1995; Takeuchi et al., 1998; Takeuchi and Uehara, 1996; Uba, 1994). Significantly, Xu and Chi (2013) found that family and friends served as both a source of support and a source of stress for their Asian study participants. Roley et al.’s (2013) work indicates that family cohesion moderates the relationship between acculturative stress and depression, while Chae et al. (2014) reported that, among Vietnamese female immigrants to Korea, social support can help prevent depression and health problems. These findings will become salient in the section below on the interaction of family and Arab women’s experiences of studying in the West.

Furthermore, studies have reported an association between the media and acculturative stress. Warren and Rios (2013) studied Hispanic males, body image, and acculturative stress. They demonstrated that “acculturative stress was significantly positively correlated with social comparison with models in the media, endorsement of American and Oceania students, those from Africa and Asia scored higher on acculturative stress tests. Additionally, the degree to which a student identifies with a particular culture also can impact acculturative stress. In studying Mexican immigrant students, Kim et al. (2014) found that ethnic identity heightened the negative effect of acculturative stress on psychological well-being. In research that is directly relevant to the present inquiry, the availability of academic advisory groups has been found to affect students’ acculturative stress. Wei et al. (2012) found that for students with high academic expectations (primarily because of their relationship with an advisory group) but low English proficiency, acculturative stress was associated with distress.

Taking an innovative direction, Berry (2001) emphasized on the attitudes of the host culture on acculturation. He thus discussed multicultural ideology, which focuses “on how one group thinks that the other...should [italics in original] acculturate” (p. 618). Kosic (2002) cites Berry as the source of the observation that those with significant cultural differences are often forced to choose a strategy rather than select one for themselves (p. 180). Curman et al. (2005) concur that “immigrants and minorities do not unilaterally determine the process of their acculturation.” In related research, Amer and Hover (2007) investigated Berry’s four acculturation strategies with Muslim and Arab-American Christians and found different strategies and mental health outcomes for these subgroups. The Christian respondents reported less depression and greater assimilation and integration into US culture as compared with the Muslim study participants. Moreover, they failed to find significant differences between the groups’ desires to select their own integration strategy (Kalek et al., 2010).
Mak et al. (1994) explained this effect through the cultural distance hypothesis: the more different the cultures, the more likely the differences may contribute to poorer mental health. Various studies confirm this outcome (as quoted in Kalek et al., 2010).

Based on the notion that discrimination – whether perceived or actual – has a negative effect on one’s well-being, Kurman et al. (2005) concluded that those who attempt to help groups integrate must bear the acculturation aims of the majority well in mind. Berry (2001) referred to those aims as the “strategies of the larger society.” In this regard, it has been found that data “demonstrate a strong relationship between perceived discrimination and acculturative stress, and the mental health of Arab American adolescents” (Ahmed et al., 2011: 189). For Kosic (2002), immigrants’ adaptation hinged on their perception of the acceptance of the host society (p. 195).

Of course, perceptions run both ways. Eshel and Rosenthal-Sokolov (2000) found that the ability to achieve acculturation lessened over time for immigrants to Israel, perhaps as “participants’ first impressions of their acceptance by Israelis seemed to be replaced a few months later by less idyllic perceptions of their social position” (p. 689). The host society’s perceptions are critical in determining how the host culture reacts to immigrants. Kalek et al. (2010) reported that the perceived threat of Muslims is the best predictor of attitudes towards Muslims in host countries. Wise and Ali (2008) found that “social and economic marginalization, not Muslims’ religious or cultural values, preclude Muslim-Australians from integrating into Australian society” (Kalek et al., 2010).

Notably, it has been found that immigrant Muslims tend to be enthusiastic about embracing the host country’s values, and particularly so in North America. According to a recent study by Duke University professor Jacob Vigdor, Muslims in Canada have a higher assimilation rate than any other country in the world, with the U.S. close behind. In fact, says Vigdor, “In the United States, immigrants born in predominantly Muslim nations assimilate more than the rest of the foreign-born population…” (Potter, 2012).

Whether or not immigrants desire to integrate, acculturative stress can surface. Aiming to reduce this stress, Berry et al. (2006) proposed a program of initiatives to encourage acceptance of diversity. They view educational efforts on the value of diversity suitable vehicles for these initiatives. Kalek et al. (2010) concur that public and private initiatives have the potential to facilitate the acceptance of ethnic others, as can the media and business groups. The authors also found that intergroup contact tended to decrease unfavorable views of Muslims. Notably, however, the presence of another group does not necessarily promote a change in perspectives. Such contacts have to be of a certain quality, where groups come together as equals, for example.

Some scholars have stressed that international students ought to be prepared for acculturative stress in their home countries. Prior to leaving for a host country, sojourner students might be advised to reframe the cross-cultural stressors they encounter as growth opportunities (Yakunina et al., 2013). On the receiving end, it has been suggested that host institutions arrange for their international students support groups, mentors, and host families, who can provide practical information and resources on transportation, housing, and other critical aspects of daily life (Yakunina et al., 2013). Many of these suggestions cover the needs of all foreign students, regardless of home country. This perspective echoes that of then-US Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs, Evan M. Ryan, who stated: The connections made during international education experiences last a lifetime. International students enrich classrooms, campuses and communities in ways that endure long after students return to their home countries. We encourage U.S. schools to continue to welcome more international students to their campuses and to do more to make study abroad a reality for all of their students (IIE, 2014).

Ryan further underscored the significance of international education: “Education promotes the relationship building and knowledge exchange between people and communities in the United States and around the world that are necessary to solve global challenges.”

ACCULTURATIVE STRESS AMONG FEMALE ARAB STUDENTS IN WESTERN UNIVERSITIES

This section will unfold as follows: Four main topics will be examined in the context of acculturative stress among female Arab students in western institutions of higher education: (1) mixed-gender academic settings; (2) language barriers; (3) discrimination; (4) approaches to academic problems, and (5) presence/absence of family.

Mixed-gender academic settings

In Sandekian et al.’s (2015) investigation of the academic experiences of female Saudi graduate students at a large American university, the authors focused on distress stemming from the difference between the restrictions imposed upon their respondents in Saudi Arabia and the freedom they experienced in the United States. Employing narrative inquiry, they found that while direct interaction – including in educational settings – among unrelated men and women is completely prohibited in their interviewees’ home country, none of them reported difficulties with male
teachers or classmates. In contrast, Alhazmi (2010), who studied Saudi international students in Australia, found that some of his female interviewees initially experienced the mixed-gender setting as highly intimidating. The Saudi female students in Altamimi’s (2014) study tended remain silent in their mixed-gender classrooms, a tendency attributed by the author to their cultural training (Altamimi, 2014, cited in Alqefari, 2015). Female Kuwaitis in Abu Rabia’s (2017) study on undergraduate Arab international students in US universities reported discomfort with their mixed-gender classrooms – to the point of avoidance of the opposite sex in that setting.

Significantly, a further feature of the female Arab students’ experiences in mixed-gender academic environment problems appears in the literature. Thus, some of Sandekian et al.’s (2015) female student participants reported that it was mainly the presence of their male Saudi classmates – who they believed were scrutinizing their behavior – that generated acculturative stress. This sense was also articulated by a female Saudi graduate student studying in Canada, who was quoted in Alqadayri and Gounko’s (2018) study as saying: “Honestly, I felt the Saudi guys were watching every movement every Saudi girl made...If the Saudi guys saw me talking to other male classmates, they would accuse me of lacking shyness (hayaa)” (p. 1742). Alqefari’s (2015) research on Saudi women studying English abroad demonstrates both aforementioned aspects of acculturative stress. Hence, while Saudi sojourner students reported anxiety in mixed-gender classes, this anxiety was heightened in the presence of Saudi males.

Language barriers

Abu Rabia’s (2017) Arab international students experienced the English language as their major barrier, and stated that even extensive time (up to two years) in ESL programs was not sufficient for their needs in an American university. For the Saudi women students who Lefdlah-Davis and Perrone-McGovern (2015) studied, English-language proficiency loomed large in the area of acculturative stress. A third of their interviewees mentioned this issue as a barrier to their success, while about half of them (at least partially) attributed their smooth adjustment to their strong English skills. Among Clerenhan et al.’s (2011) international nursing students, English was not perceived as a major acculturative stressor – a finding the authors suggest may be related to the one-to-one language support offered by the university. In findings that brings us to the next acculturative stressor, namely, discrimination, Sandekian et al.’s (2017) interviewees discussed some native-student intolerance of their lack of English fluency during class discussions, and Yakaboski, et al. (2018) noted that the American practice of grading in-class participation – which was naturally more difficult for non-native English speakers – was perceived by some of their respondents as discriminatory in nature. Among Arab Female students in Israel, English is perceived as one of the major barrier for their success in academic (Al-Krenawi, 2016).

Discrimination

Sandekian et al.’s (2017) study participants reported an overall enjoyment of their campus and surrounding community experience. Specifically, they noted sensitivity to their religious and cultural needs, as well as a distinct lack of intolerance concerning their Saudi heritage. The Saudi women students in Lefdlah-Davis and Perrone-McGovern’s (2015) study, by contrast, were split with regard to the issue of discrimination – about half of the participants answered in the affirmative when asked if they had experienced it. But this negative behavior, which was mostly related to their veiling, was described as quite uncommon. Instead, they reported a neutral or positive curiosity on the part of many Americans about their hair covering. Two Arab female students who wore a hijab in Clerenhan et al.’s (2011) study, for their part, discussed being stared at, as well as talked about, by passersby. One of Young and Clark’s (2017) female respondents reported that when she covered her face in public, strangers had called her a “ninja.”

The discrimination confronted by Arab women students in the West, however, does not always stem from those native to the West. Alqadayri and Gounko (2018), for example, found that some study participants complained about discrimination from the Arab community in their host countries. Thus, in their study, Tala stated: “Before coming to Canada, I was afraid that I would face discrimination and racism. [But] I have been mistreated not by the Canadians, but by the Arabs...When I decided not to wear a hijab...the negative reaction and mistreatment came from the fellow Arabs” (p. 1744). The authors show that such navigation of Middle Eastern and western values generated a palpable acculturative discomfort among their interviewees.

Approaches to academic problems

Gauntlett’s (2006) research on Gulf-sponsored students in Australia contributes an interesting factor to the discussion of mechanisms for managing academic problems among international students: that of traditional ways of dealing with such difficulties versus modern ones. Thus, the author proposed that her study participants’ family-based methods of dealing with poor academic performance (e.g., providing mentors, prevailing upon familial contacts to modify
grades, or negotiating employment through well-connected friends) were not translatable to the host environment. This appears to have produced acculturative stress among her (mostly) Omani study participants. In a related finding with an opposite acculturative stress outcome, in her research on the study-abroad experiences of Saudi Arabian women, Kampman (2011) discussed what she referred to as academic “outsourcing” among her respondents. Thus, they did not feel overwhelmed by academic demands because they turned to family or paid tutors to complete any assignment that they deemed too difficult to manage on their own. It ought to be noted that, according to the author, this is considered an accepted academic solution in Saudi Arabia. Another study by Al-Haj (203) discussed the teaching style in the Arab world compared with the West; the author pointed out it is like “depositing knowledge” rather than investigating and exploring problem solving (for example, multiple choice exams and presentation in the class). Thus we believe that this issue adds more stress on the Arab Female students in the West. In addition, the sociopolitical context where the International students came from has some implication on the students’ achievements and integration.

Turning to a related topic, in his investigation of intercultural conflict in the classroom, Al-Issa (2005) discusses the cultural dimension of collectivism versus individualism. Building on the seminal work of Hofstede (1980), Al-Issa observed that teachers in individualistic cultures expect students to act autonomously and creatively – as well as competitively. Teachers in collectivist cultures, in stark contrast, expect their students to absorb the material as it is presented to them, and they regard academic competition negatively. This notion was confirmed in the literature surveyed for this article. For example, Clerenhan et al. (2011) mentioned the presence of acculturative stress in their interviewees in regards to the academic demand in the host country for critical academic thinking, which places a strong emphasis on “the individual’s viewpoint, discerning merit in sources, and structuring argument” (p. 6).

Presence/absence of family

Unlike most international students, female Saudi students are generally accompanied to the host country by at least one male family member (SACM, personal communication, November 3, 2012, cited in Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern, 2015). As mentioned above, the presence of family can have different effects on acculturative stress – in some cases, it can serve to exacerbate it, while in others, it can serve to mitigate it. Regarding family circumstances, none of Sandekian et al.’s (2017) interviewees mentioned family members’ presence as an obstacle in their attainment of academic success. In their grounded-theory, qualitative study on Saudi women studying in US colleges and universities, Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern (2015) found that acute isolation and loneliness were not a major source of acculturative stress for their interviewees, a finding that they suggest may be related to the presence of Saudi family in the United States. Yet, in their exploration of Saudi Arabian nurses studying for their masters’ degree in Australia, Clerenhan et al. (2011) reported acculturative stress in connection with the study/family life balance. The married female students in their study did not have extended family present, and they found this absence as significant stress with respect to domestic life. Moreover, in findings that recall research noted above, some female participants in Clerenhan et al’s study reported that the presence of their brothers contributed to acculturative stress in that the males sought to behave as protective guardians of their student sisters.

RECOMMENDATIONS/CONCLUSIONS

This article examined the acculturative stress among female Arab students in western institutions of higher education. In doing so, it sought to contribute to a lacuna in the literature on this topic – one which has only recently begun to receive scholarly attention. The article began with an overview of the background on the subject, noting that, despite their numbers, Arab international students in general have been overlooked in the scholarship, and that female Arab international students have been particularly neglected in this regard. Thereafter, it contextualized the research question by exploring the concepts of “acculturation” and “acculturative stress.” In the main section, the research topic was investigated through the prism of five intersecting categories, namely: (1) mixed-gender academic settings; (2) language barriers; (3) discrimination; (4) approaches to academic problems, and (5) presence/absence of family. The article will conclude with implications for treatment and research.

All five of the aforementioned categories intersect on the issue of collectivist considerations. Thus, in each of the discussions above, the family, the extended family, and the broader group of co-religionists appeared as a core paradigm. We suggest that this intense embeddedness of the individual within his or her religious/cultural group – both narrowly and widely understood – constitutes the key to addressing the acculturative stress of female Arab sojourner students in the West.

Thus, in their study on culturally sensitive clinical practice with Arab clients, Al-Krenawi and Graham (2000) explain that practitioners who work with Arab individuals in the West need to shift their focus from the individual, and provide interventions that take both immediate and extended family, as well as the community and tribal background, into account. Moreover, and as clearly
demonstrated in the current article, the authors emphasize the crucial importance of taking into consideration gender relations, the role the client takes in his or her family and community, and his or her level of acculturataion. The female Arab international students discussed above showed a wide range of positionality on these scales.

In a similar vein, Keshavarzi and Haque (2013), in their article on enhancing Muslim mental health within an Islamic context, draw attention to the idea that treatment of Muslims ought to be informed by the profound collectivity of the Islamic culture. As such, rather than individual identity, it is the client's communal identity that, first and foremost, should be the object of clinical exploration. We have seen above how such communal identity deeply colors the acculturative experiences of women students from the Arab region.

Taking a cue from Podikunju-Hussain (n.d.), whose study centered on counseling suggestions in work with Muslims, therapists working with female Arab international students in the western universities might take note of what the author describes as the exceptionally porous line between religion and culture for this population. In this regard, female Arab sojourner students in the West might experience an ongoing tension in juggling their religious beliefs and cultural values with those of the surrounding host environment. In the view of Podikunju-Hussain, the western clinician is tasked with helping such individuals clarify these lines when dealing with their acculturative stress.

Finally, Haque et al. (2016) advocate an integrative approach in clinical work with Muslim individuals. Thus, they call for the development of treatment interventions for this population that are distinctly Islamically oriented, that is, that eschew individual-based notions of psychological workings. Such interventions – and the authors stress, research on their efficacy – could then be supplemented by more humanistic, psychodynamic, and cognitive methods.

In this way, we suggest, female Arab international students – as well as others who adhere to Muslim religious and cultural precepts – could feel comfortable availing themselves of counseling opportunities in their host institutions and surrounding communities that are specifically designed with their acculturative considerations in mind.

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