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As the number of international students studying in the United States increases, it is important to analyze how specific subsets of international students understand their experiences in order to ensure student success in specific populations. Both female students and Saudi students have individually been given very little attention in the academic literature. Because of these intersecting identities, this research sought to understand the lived experience of Saudi international women studying in the United States. Two theories guided this project, critical race feminism and transformative learning theory. Eight Saudi women were interviewed who lived in the U.S. for at least two years and who completed a degree at a university in the United States and were, at the time of the interviews, again living in Saudi Arabia. Three in-depth, qualitative interviews based in phenomenology per participant were conducted in order to gain the necessary depth for a phenomenological analysis. The research sought to answer the following questions:

1) What are the lived experiences of Saudi international women in U.S. colleges and universities?

   a) What social, cultural, and academic challenges have they faced?

   b) What do they perceive as positive social, cultural, and academic experiences?

2) How do the educational experiences and knowledge gained from being an
   international student in the United States influence how they view themselves?

   The data were analyzed using Brookfield's seven tasks of transformative learning
theory (i.e., challenging ideologies, contesting hegemony, unmasking power, overcoming
alienation, learning liberation, reclaiming reason, and practicing democracy) to look at
the participants' international study experiences based on gender and race. I found that
the participants were able to analyze their international study experiences clearly through
the lens of sexism but had much more difficulty doing the same based on race. Several
themes beyond Brookfield's framework were identified, namely ambassadorship,
isolation, *hijab*, patriarchy, empowerment, and identity shifting. Due to these themes in
conjunction with Brookfield's framework, I identify implications for practice as well as
suggestions for future research.

NAVIGATING GROWING AWARENESS AND SHIFTING IDENTITIES:

THE EXPERIENCES OF SAUDI INTERNATIONAL WOMEN

WHO STUDIED IN THE UNITED STATES

by

Noura Aloush Abothneen

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APPROVAL PAGE

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To my friends, thank you for your support: For making my stay in the United States hospitable, especially in the final stages of this dissertation process.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Five years ago, my then three-year-old son came to me and asked, "Mommy, what is your color?" I replied with a question, "What do you mean baby?" He said, "My color is brown and yours is too!" I was in total shock. How does that question arise and what does it mean? And where does a three-year-old learn about such a concept, when it has not been introduced in the home? As a Saudi international student dealing with transitions and changes from one education system to another, it felt like living in a new country was a challenge that required me to assess my own worldview. I am not only an international student studying abroad, I am a part of a social structure that both might support me and negatively affect my educational journey.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera,* Anzaldua (2007) describes her experience of realizing her multiple intersecting identities stating, "At first I feel exposed and opened to the depth of my dissatisfaction. Then I feel myself closing, hiding, holding together rather than allowing myself to fall apart" (p.70). My experience as an international student, from this moment with my son, felt similar. It was through this moment that I realized that the educational journey I was facing in the U.S. was not only in the classroom and on the campus, but it was impacting multiple areas of my life and facets of my various identities. This led to my interest in researching how Saudi women adjust to their transitioning lives and sense of self when they go through a potentially transformative

experience like studying abroad in a country with a vastly different culture than that of their home country.

In Saudi Arabia, women are segregated from men across all public and private spheres as a consequence of cultural, social, and religious practice. When Saudi women come to the United States to attend universities, they often experience dramatic challenges, not only due to differences in gender-related cultural practices but also constructions of race, ethnicity, and colorism, particularly as Saudi Arabia is mostly a racially homogenous society.

Upon reviewing the academic literature on international student experiences, I determined that the experiences and personal growth of international Saudi women studying in the United States have not been explored in-depth, thus hearing their perspectives on cultural adaptation could benefit universities and those interested in cultural studies better understand the phenomena. Through the dual lenses of critical race feminist theory and transformative learning theory, I examined how the Saudi women in my study felt about the acculturation process. In addition, I sought to add to the literature about how these women re-adapted to their home country and culture after their course of study.

The purpose of this project was to provide an understanding of how Saudi women view their experiences as international university students in the United States and how these experiences impacted their social and academic lives. The lenses of critical race feminism (Wing & Smith, 2005) and transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997)

were used to interpret the results of semi-structured interviews with Saudi women who studied at universities in the United States.

Problem Statement

The United States has experienced a surge in attracting international students from across the globe who are trying to obtain a higher quality education (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2015). Students from Saudi Arabia are no exception. In the year 2005, the government of Saudi Arabia, led by King Abdullah Bin Abdul-Aziz, established a scholarship program to give Saudi students the opportunity to study abroad (Ministry of Higher Education, n.d.). As this scholarship program for studying in the U.S. approaches its 12th year, the United States Open Door reports that there are nearly 60,000 Saudi students out of a total of 974,926 international students studying in the U.S. It states that Saudi international students are the largest percentage of the growth of international students in the U.S., reaching seven percent of the total number of international students in the country (IIE, 2015). Out of this total, Alhazmi and Nyland (2013) indicate that the number of Saudi women studying in the U.S. is growing, making up 21.79% of the total number of all Saudi students in 2010.

Arab governments have made women's participation in higher education a priority since at least the early 1990s. Saudi Arabian women now represent 56.6 percent of domestic university students (Lindsey, 2012), and many of these women further their educations abroad. Yet there is little research concerning Saudi international women students. More specifically there is a gap in the literature concerning international Saudi women students' lived experiences and challenges.

Although Saudi international students are in the top percentage of the growth of international students in the U.S. (IIE, 2015), a lack of research focusing on them has led to little being known about their experiences and what processes and practices could influence their adaptation to U.S. American higher education. While some of the pedagogical tools in both higher education contexts (Saudi Arabia and the United States) are similar, for example, reliance on lectures and teaching to the test (Prokop, 2003; Russell, 2004) and focusing on exams that depend on memorizing what is written in books (Hsieh, 2006a; Prokop, 2003; Russell, 2004), there are some differences noted in the literature. For instance, some of the literature focuses on the educational challenges and reforms to the educational policies in the Middle East, especially in regard to teacher-centered pedagogical methods prevalent in the region versus the student-oriented pedagogy that is more common in the U.S. (Chapman & Miric, 2009; Nour, 2011).

In addition, traditional definitions of Arabic identity include people from most of the Middle East and parts of Africa. It is worth noting, however, "[t]he Arab world is defined by language rather than ethnicity. The League of Arab States, formed in 1945, consists of all countries in which (a dialect of) Arabic is the spoken language of the majority" (Rauch & Kostyshak, 2009, p. 165). Therefore, generalizations about the experiences or identities of students from Arabic-speaking countries need to be constantly critiqued. Nevertheless, students from the Arab world are underrepresented in the literature that I reviewed (Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015). Tuma (2002) discussed the importance of research with minority identity groups by stating that, "The research allows the minority group to be taken out of the invisible realm, and to become

visible" (p. 2). By conducting research with a group that is often ignored in the literature, marginalized voices that were previously silenced are able to be magnified.

Since most of the research has been narrowly focused on acculturation, a framework that is explained and examined in the literature review in Chapter II, most of it has lacked critical analysis that delves into the actual process of navigating through the different systems that Saudi women international students undertake and how such a process may impact identity development as well as the ways in which female international students adhere to or push against dominant narratives of acculturation. Conducting research using a critical race feminism and transformative theory framework allowed me to uncover a deeper and more thorough understanding of the tensions that these students navigated. These findings can contribute to any student, administrator, or professor interacting with Saudi international women, which may assist them in understanding what such women are experiencing and feeling challenged by.

Research Questions

There are two major research questions for this study:

1. What are the lived experiences of Saudi international women studying in U.S. colleges and universities?

    a. What social, cultural, and academic challenges have they faced?

    b. What do they perceive as positive social, cultural, and academic experiences?

2. How do the educational experiences and knowledge gained from being an international student in the United States influence how they view themselves?

Introduction to Theoretical Frameworks

Two main theories function together to build my theoretical framework: critical race feminism and transformative learning theory. While both of these theories have their basis in critical theory, they both offer different ways to approach and analyze my research on the experiences of Saudi international women studying in the U.S. Both of these theories are discussed in more detail in Chapter III.

Critical Race Feminism

Looking into studies related to international students, most of the articles and theories were based on acculturation. This concept revolves around the idea that students should mold their foreign personality to adjust to a new, more middle-class U.S. White American personality and identity. For students that come from countries with little to no racial diversity, and who are then seen as racially distinct while in the U.S., this can lead to feeling that their own uniqueness and differences are not acknowledged. Personally, I have come to understand that when I am labeled without being allowed to explain my identity in these contexts, I face racism in the U.S. (Johnson, 2005). Thus, I believe that intersectionality, which is how social categorizations like race, gender and class are interconnected, is a major concept that cannot be ignored in my research and is best addressed through the use of a branch of critical theory.

The memory I shared at the start of this chapter is reflective of how white supremacy is embedded in the cultural and educational systems, as well as in the literature—molding everyone, especially international people of color, to act like white U.S. American people. This is why critical race feminist theory (CRF) is an appropriate

fit for my research interest because it highlights the silenced voices of women of color.

This project focused on the experiences of Saudi women who earned a degree in the

United States and then returned to Saudi Arabia. I engaged critical race feminism because

it "seeks to understand how society organizes itself along intersections of race, gender,

class, and other forms of social hierarchies" (Verjee, 2012, p. 57). The participants in this

study are both privileged in some ways (e.g., middle and upper-middle class, traveling to

the U.S., and pursuing advanced educational degrees) and also hold minority identities,

especially as women and Muslims. While CRF is suitable for this study because it

addresses many of the issues that women of color face, it lacks a specific mechanism to

look at the ways in which international students experience education-related transitions,

something that transformative learning theory can offer.

Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative learning theory (TLT) was first developed by Mezirow (1978)

when he studied American women returning to postsecondary study or the workplace in

order to, "identify factors that characteristically impede or facilitate" that process (p. 6).

Subsequently, Brookfield (2005) contributed several learning tasks to the framework in

order to expand the focus of the theory from individual experiences to also include

structural elements with which the self interacts.

Transformative learning theory (TLT) is rooted in critical pedagogy and looks at

the changes in our personal perspectives that take place through learning, positioning

learning as something that transforms our lives, as well as how we see and understand

ourselves, our experience, and the world around us. According to TLT, learning calls our

old understandings and past experiences into question due to something new in our lives, and then attributes new meanings to our lives and experiences. Based on this understanding, TLT is a theory that can provide rich insights about the ways that Saudi women international students view their experiences both in the United States and in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, using TLT's three interdependent core elements of learning (psychological, convictional, and behavioral) (Taylor, 2007) to explore international Saudi women students' experiences from critical perspectives can further show how these women socially construct and deconstruct their identities, as well as the world around them, through dialogue and self-reflection.

Introduction to In-Depth Phenomenological Interviewing

Qualitative phenomenological research designs are used to understand the meaning and interpretation of participants' thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and experiences (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). Understanding a common experience that a specific group of people has undergone, such as that of Saudi women who studied in the U.S. as international students, lends itself to a phenomenological methodology (to be described in Chapter III). In the current research, I used in-depth phenomenological interviews as a way of gathering data and to highlight these experiences.

Positionality

As a Saudi international student studying for a Cultural Foundations of Education doctorate in the United States, I struggled to find a topic that relates to my cultural background as a Saudi woman. Trying to find my way, understand my identity and adapt to a new culture has not been easy. I found that it is hard to make every individual

student understand who I am and what I stand for. Because of my personal experience, I have delved into the literature to find something that speaks to me on multiple levels.

My decision to conduct my dissertation research with Saudi international women students is not only derived from the seeming lack of research related to this population, but it is directly related to the fact that I myself share this combination of identities. Since coming to the U.S., my understanding of how I have developed and changed in dealing with essential conditions in life and the new world has been altered (Illeris, 2014). In my early school life in Saudi Arabia I was "…taught not to feel or experience emotions, and definitely not to explore or to be creative, or to participate in questioning the dominant ideological paradigm" (Felman, 2001, p. 33). We were not taught to reflect critically on ourselves or our educational process. Furthermore, multiculturalism and understanding the level of diverse cultures are not a part of the cultural consciousness of Saudi schools. The sense of culture is embedded in our particular Islamic beliefs about a woman's role in society and how she presents herself.

Since I chose to not cover my head in the U.S., I have been judged for this decision by both Saudi and non-Saudi people. Often, non-Muslim U.S. women interpreted this choice as evidence of success and progress to challenge the oppression, even though it is not even related to my academic or financial achievement. I was viewed to be a model of a real liberal woman because I am a Muslim woman who does not wear the *hijab*, which is considered a religious requirement among Muslims to demonstrate my religious values. In this more liberal country, I feel that I have been praised for this choice by U.S. women and seen as an example of a true feminist. What has puzzled me

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has been that the only factor they looked at was my appearance, not my mind or my uniqueness as a foreign contributor to the culture of U.S. feminism. Because the *hijab* can serve as an easy visual marker of religious and racial identity, and because I chose not to cover, I felt like I must wear my skin color or my religion in other ways in order to give others a clue as to how they should view me or in which category I should be placed. I struggled to show my individuality and explain my multiple identities as a foreign learner and a Muslim woman in school in the U.S.

My assimilation into the dominant culture made me feel that I was losing my existing identities and the ways those identities intersected. I felt threatened by attempts to try to mold me into a more Western feminist (e.g., the strong encouraging reaction to not wearing *hijab*). Muslim women are not the only ones to face this kind of identity denial and oppression in dominant 'white' Western society; all women of color are subject to this. For example, Gloria Anzaldua shared her story of losing and creating her identity as well. Anzaldua (2007) stated that "'Knowing' is painful because after 'it' happens I can't stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before" (p. 70). Reading Anzaldua's (2007) work *Borderlands/La Frontera* not only affected me deeply, but it also inspired me. Her philosophy of personal growth, identity, and self-worth empowered me to navigate my own identity and exploring my own culture. Her framework of understanding herself and embracing her intersectionality centered me and guided my critical theoretical view and transformational process.

Still, the question about not covering made me stop and think about who I am and what has shaped my identities, as well as where my beliefs came from and how they

developed. This reflection is ultimately preparing me for what I may face when I return back to my country, all the while finding my purpose and having the space to talk about my journey, understanding "the personal and pedagogical" (Brock, 2010). This personal exploration called me to take up work that centered the stories of my sister Saudi international women studying in the U.S., and their stories of navigating these complicated issues of new found racial and religious differences during their studies in the U.S. In this sense, this project mirrors Freire's (2010) writings about teaching being a journey that leads me to searching and questioning and as well as being willing to be questioned about my beliefs.

Moving from the personal to the political, through this work I investigate how other international Saudi women students describe their journeys to and from their studies in the United States, not solely through their ethnicity or religion, but also through understanding their multiple identities: wife, mother, or single Saudi, wearing *hijab* or not, and women of color and different races. It is fundamental to look back in order to look ahead to understand how their identities changed and transformed.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

I have structured my literature review into three sections. The first section

commences with a discussion of what the literature offered regarding the study of

international students in general, and International Saudi women experiences specifically,

to define the most common themes that informed this topic. The second section outlines

critiques of the theories employed in the field of international student studies. The last

section explains the theoretical framework that I am employing for this project, a

combination of critical race feminism and transformative learning theory, to highlight the

experiences of the Saudi international women students that I interviewed.

International Students

A limited number of studies on international students have been conducted that

have a longitudinal component (Gu, Schweisfurth & Day, 2010; Hanassab, 2006). As a

consequence, little is known about the processes and practices that influence international

students' adaptation to American higher education. Instead, studies have identified

factors and obstacles that challenge international students (Hsieh, 2006a, 2006b, 2007).

The aim of many of these studies was to identify factors in international student success

and to identify problems in order to improve international student services (Hsieh, 2006a,

2006b, 2007; Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014; Qin & Lykes, 2006). Some identify outcomes

of the international experience such as the increased confidence and independence of

students (Hsieh, 2007), and some reference cultural competencies (Lobnibe, 2009), but the majority of the specific literature available on international female students does not address how students' lives and educational experiences may be transformed while studying abroad.

The literature on international students (Kwon, 2009; Lobnibe, 2009; Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014; Nour, 2011; Shideh, 2006; Sultana & Smith, 2011; Tangen & Mercer, 2012) suggests that international students, in general, experience a series of anxieties and challenges during their adjustment to a new country as they encounter different learning and studying environments as well as different social and cultural norms. In addition to these challenges, language barriers make it difficult for students to quickly develop a community and support system in a new environment (Kwon, 2009). The challenges fall into three main categories found throughout the literature: academic, social, and cultural. The three categories are often complexly interwoven and aspects of one may impact another. At the same time, each category does have unique characteristics. The *academic* category typically focuses on the abilities of international students to adjust to a new educational system, including teaching methods, educational institutions, and course assignments. The *cultural* category incorporates topics related to values, behaviors, and traditions that are unique to different communities (in this case differences between Saudi culture and American culture). Finally, the *social* category refers to the broader setting in which international students find themselves. This may include differences between regions and environments, and it also includes broader systems of operation such as government, economics, education, and politics.

International Students' Academic Experiences

Most articles focused on international students' academic challenges. For example, a phenomenological study by Halic, Greenberg, and Paulus's (2009) came up with four themes based on their participants' experiences: (1) mastering the language; (2) the meaning of language proficiency; (3) language and academic identity; and (4) joining a new community of practice. Moreover, due to their minority status, many international students experience inequitable or marginalized treatment in schools and in group assignments (Hsieh, 2007; Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014).

The impact of language was a theme that emerged in numerous other studies. Due to language difficulties, students can face confusion, misunderstandings, and struggles with course and program content, as well as feelings of great anxiety and stress concerning in-class participation and presentations (Chun & Poole, 2009; Erichsen, 2011; Myers-Walls, Frias, Kwon, Ko, & Lu, 2011). As Cho (2013) determined, oral proficiency with the English language impacted the participation of international students in the classroom and their interaction with peers, resulting in misunderstandings and additional stress. Similarly, Alazzi and Chido (2006) found that the limited proficiency of Jordanian students also impacted their participation. They also found that the students' academic accomplishments were neglected versus the importance of addressing the social issues needed to better adjust to and further their understanding of their host country. Hakami (2013) conducted a quantitative research project drawing from acculturation theory to explore challenges facing 4,776 Saudi women studying in the U.S. and identified language as one of the main challenges.

Differences in learning contexts were also found to impact international students' academic experiences as, in some instances, their previous educational experiences differed greatly from the ones they experienced in the United States. Bamber (2014) noted in his mixed methods study that the difference between the educational context in China and the United States is one important matter that challenges Chinese female students academically. This is summed up via one of his participants,

> You see, in China we come from a different background...there is a bad history regarding critical thinking. Chinese employers are worried that you will return [from the UK] with a critical outlook, you'll come up with different opinions, saying 'no' to your leader is not good. (p. 54)

This highlights one of the many tensions that can be found in navigating international study. For Saudi international students, Young and Snead (2017) had a similar finding as differences in preferred classroom communication styles posed a challenge for students when writing assignments, reading, understanding lectures and taking notes. The education system was also found to be a challenge for the Saudi women in Hakami's (2013) study.

One study identified factors that facilitated the academic success of international students. In their research into factors that improve the persistence of Arab international students and facilitate their academic adjustment at universities in the U.S., Rabia and Karkouti (2017) found that student success centers, faculty, family and friend support, sufficient time and extracurricular activities were all vital to overcoming acculturation challenges and successfully completing their degrees.

International Students' Social Experiences

In regard to the social challenges faced by international students, Gu, Schweisfurth, and Day (2009) stated that loneliness is one major challenge that international students face. Participants in their study expressed feelings of powerlessness, alienation, and lacked a sense of belonging. The results of both of their surveys found that almost half the respondents (49% and 48%) were unhappy with their social lives because of loneliness. Similarly, in a study with 21 Chinese first-year international students, students reported "blatant acts of discrimination and awareness of being outsiders, both of which led to negative feelings toward domestic students" (Yao, 2018, p. 93). On the other hand, in her dissertation about the experiences of Saudi students in Missouri, Hofer and Woodhouse (2009), noted that the "students' qualitative comments were generally positive and optimistic" (p. 189).

Malcolm and Mendoza (2014) used performativity and identity in their conceptual framework to discuss how Afro-Caribbean international students negotiate their various identities, particularly when they are perceived by others as African American. Their article focused on identity, agency, and intersectionality. Their findings show that international Afro-Caribbean students "undergo dynamic and complex process as they negotiate their ethnic identity on U.S. campuses…conceptualizing their identity as fluid, contingent, and negotiated, consistently shifting and transforming" (p. 611). These differences create constraints that can contribute to difficulties with their interactions in an academic environment. Similarly, Alazzi and Chido (2006) found the academic accomplishments of the Jordanian students in their study were neglected because the

students did not address the social issues that would allow them to better adjust to and further their understanding of their host country. Furthermore, Young and Snead (2017) identified social and emotional difficulties that arose from adjusting to the rhythm of American life. Hakami (2013) also reported that her Saudi female participants faced social challenges when adjusting to their studies in the U.S.

Overall, these studies found that international students' social experiences impacted their academic studies. Additionally, six out of the seven studies reported that students had negative social experiences. The social aspects of students' study abroad are important to consider and should not be overlooked in international student research. Applying a critical analysis to this sort of research in the future may expose some of the broader structural, political, and socio-cultural reasons for the students' negative experiences.

International Students' Cultural Experiences

Along with language and social issues, international students are confronted with cultural difficulties living abroad, and those cultural difficulties were often found to impact other aspects of students' experiences. For example, Halic et al.'s (2009) study suggested that cultural identity is central to the academic experience of non-native speakers. This section identifies the cultural issues that emerged from the review of the literature.

An archival research study analyzing the use of campus mental health services conducted by Yakushko, Davidson, and Sanford-Martens (2008) recommended a greater understanding of the counseling use patterns of students from different countries, taking

into account the specific political, cultural, and economic factors that shape the lived experiences of those students in the U.S. and in other countries. Many studies suggest that the factors of gender, type of degree program, accompanying family members, living conditions, length of time in U.S., and cultural origin significantly affect the perceptions and experiences of international students (Hakami, 2013; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006; Sakamoto, 2006; Zhou & Bang, 2011). For example, Alazzi and Chido (2006) found that, due to their cultural norms, it appears that Jordanian international students are reluctant to approach their academic advisors for extracurricular support. The students in the study tended to keep their own ethnic identities, culture, and beliefs, which caused them to have difficulties interacting with classmates, professors, university personnel, and community members.

Some studies have focused specifically on women's cultural experiences. In a grounded theory project that was informed by critical feminist theory, Qin and Lykes (2006) conducted a study about how female Chinese graduate students negotiate critical cultural elements by ''reweaving the fragmented self," the process of transitioning from their culture of origin into a new culture while facing economic, emotional, and social challenges. The root of these challenges are cultural in nature—based on different ways of thinking, behaving, and interacting with the world based on where one has come from. The effects of these challenges extend to the academic and social spheres of the students' study abroad.

The Distinct Experiences of Female Saudi International Students

A limited number of studies were found that focused on female Saudi students and although many of the findings echoed those of other international students, some of the findings were distinct. The majority of the articles used acculturation as their theoretical framework, which I describe and critique in a later section. I encountered only four studies specifically studying female Saudi international students (two from peer-reviewed journals, two from dissertations) and one that included Saudi female participants.

In her dissertation, Hakami (2013) developed a quantitative scale to detect potential challenges with acculturation. Based on her scale, she found nine domains of potential "acculturation challenges." Although Hakami's (2013) study identified some similar challenges as other studies, the domains of psychological, financial, student visa, and religious challenges were distinct from the findings of other studies. The results showed that the acculturation challenges had significant negative effects on the educational level, English proficiency, and length of stay in the U.S. Her research did not explore in depth the lived experiences, narratives, or identity development of participants.

In her research with Saudi women students at Spring International Language Center, Alkarni (2012) conducted a case study analysis that used acculturation as her guiding theory in her dissertation. She conducted in-depth interviews with four Arabic international women, two of them from Saudi Arabia and two from Libya: one of whom was the founder of the Spring International Language Center, and three educators who work in the same language center. The aim of her study was to understand the purposes

and goals of the Saudi women who come to the United Stated to study the language. Her participants focused on instructor evaluations as a tool for improvement. In addition, she reported that her participants believed that English language centers should hire more qualified and experienced instructors that encourage in-class participation.

In a study by Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern (2015) that used grounded theory to explore the adjustment experiences of Saudi women international students, a combination of five face-to-face interviews and a research survey link that was posted on an online social network that recruited 20 more Saudi female participants was used. They reported that,

> Participant responses were grouped into the following themes: expectations about the United States versus the reality, acculturative stress or cultural adjustment, cultural differences between the United States and Saudi Arabia, experiences of discrimination and/or curiosity, English language proficiency, relationships, social support and help-seeking behavior, and being a Saudi woman in the United States. (p. 412)

Similar to other groups of international students, the adjustment of Saudi women students was affected by their proficiency in English, their relationships and social support, and their ability to successfully navigate the cultural differences found in the United States. However, the cultural differences they identified were very distinct, including public gender integration, increased mobility, greater acceptance of diversity, and more freedom and decision-making opportunities. Many of the Saudi women in this study reported being changed by their time studying in the United States, and reported increased confidence, independence, intellectual growth, and acceptance of others as some of the results of their academic sojourn. Conversely, the research team did not

encourage the participants who experienced discrimination to talk more about their experience, a mistake that they report as an oversight. This is a major omission as the literature indicates the importance of addressing discrimination-related behaviors towards international students for the negative consequences of depression, loneliness, and ultimately discouraging international students from making friends with locals (Mori, 2000), all of which may result in resistance to the host country.

It is inevitable to talk about segregation in the case of Saudi women students because, as a Saudi woman, Saudi Arabia is generally known as the most gender-segregated society in the world. This transition from a gender-segregated society to a gender-inclusive one in the United States could be a major change impacting any Saudi woman studying abroad, one that would potentially be transformative. Sandekian, Weddington, Birnbuaum, and Keen (2015) conducted a constructivist study to highlight the influence of gender segregation in Saudi society on international female students studying in the U.S. Sandekian and colleagues looked at the gendered academic experiences of four Saudi women. This article used a biographical style of narrative inquiry designed to amplify Saudi international women students' voices. By using in-depth, open-ended interviews, they gained a deeper understanding about how they felt about having male professors and classmates. Although Young and Snead (2017) found the women in their study reported discomfort with mixed gender classrooms, Sandekian et al. (2015) found out that it was not a great challenge for their participants to be in a co-ed setting. On the other hand, they felt the need for their culture to be acknowledged and to feel safe if they wanted to worship on campus. As this article's main focus was 1) to

give faculty at American institutions insight into some of the experiences faced by women Saudi international students (from a U.S. American point of view), and 2) understand women's reactions to having male professors and colleagues, it is lacking in a few ways. First of all, the only lived experience that was highlighted was an academic lived experience. Social lived experiences, on the other hand, were missing. In addition, this study did not report the length of stay in the U.S. nor did it mention the impact the length of stay might have on these experiences. Furthermore, as the authors mentioned in their limitations, none of researchers involved had any background in Arabic or Saudi culture and this would likely limit them from a deep discussion of the issues related to race, gender, and social structures in Saudi Arabia. This limitation greatly impacts how Saudi international students speak about the most significant differences between schools in the U.S and Saudi Arabia.

In summary, the studies reviewed that specifically analyzed Saudi women international student experiences approach the topic in different ways. As a whole, they begin to paint a picture about the life experiences of Saudi women pursuing higher education in the United States, with a focus on the women's academic lives and experiences. However, they are lacking a number of ways. First of all, they all use acculturation theory without critically analyzing identity development, the processes that impact their personal narratives (or counter narratives), acknowledge uniqueness, and espouse the belief that the individual person must change, not the culture. Secondly, while two of the articles (Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern, 2015; Sandekian, Weddington, Birnbuaum, & Keen, 2015) explored the impact of gender on Saudi

international women students' experience, both studies lacked an analysis of the impact of discrimination. While both studies mention the discrimination this population faces, they both did not critically dive into this topic, regardless of origin (i.e., racism, Islamophobia, et al.). In addition, only two papers were conducted by Saudi women; neither of the papers published in peer-reviewed journals had a Saudi scholar on their research team.

Identity

The articles reviewed in the previous sections sought to investigate challenges and facilitators to the success of international students as they acculturate with the aim of providing better support. Some articles examined how female international students' identities fluctuate during their stay abroad (Baek & Damarin, 2008; Bamber, 2014; Bonazzo & Wong, 2007; Hsieh, 2006a, 2007; Lee, Park, & Kim, 2009; Lobnibe, 2009; Qin & Lykes, 2006). However, none mentioned any ways in which changes students made during acculturation impacted their identity and participants were not asked to reflect their sense of self or on the lasting implications of any shifts in identity they may have experienced and what exactly was meant by identity was not clearly articulated.

As things like "female," "international," "student," and "Saudi" are all different identifiers that intersect in different ways, it is important to more thoroughly discuss what identity entails. Identity can be understood as the story we tell about ourselves and the stories that others tell about us (Sarup, 1998). It is understood to be self-coherence from space to space, or the coordination of shared psychological space made sense of through a variety of mutualities (Kegan, 1982). Identities come into being through the

establishment of congruence between self-perception and the perceptions of others (Blumer, 1986; Meltzer, Petras, & Reynolds, 1975; Reynolds, 1990). This human attribute is based on the fact that human language relies on social interactions and enables individuals to see themselves from the perspective of others, thereby allowing them to form a concept of themselves within their experienced social context.

This ability to "walk in another's shoes" can be a component of the ways we might see our identities shift over a time period, particularly when we are going through a transformative experience like studying abroad. One study that greatly influenced my dissertation project is the work of Erichsen (2011) who used transformative learning theory to analyze the ways that female international students are impacted by the process of studying abroad. Her aim was to pinpoint the various factors that relate to female international student success. In doing so, she noted that her participants described their identities very differently at different points in their study abroad experiences, from "getting lost" to "liminality" to "redefinition." These themes demonstrate that research about international students must have a focus on the ways that identity is constantly shifting and being redefined. However, as this study did not focus on a particular ethnicity, region, country, or language category, nor account for racial or ethnic identities, a more directed analysis is necessary as female international students are not a monolithic category.

For many, studying at a U.S. American university is one of the first opportunities to confront and shape a vision of who they are beyond their understood cultural roles in

their home environment (Ward, 2008). This potential shift in identity has been theorized

by scholars as acculturation, which I will discuss in more detail in the next section.

Acculturation

Berry (2005), a renowned acculturation theorist, used the term acculturation to

refer to the processes and adjustments that occur at an individual level as an outcome of

contact with different cultures. The concept of acculturation is used to explain dynamics

involved when people from diverse cultural backgrounds come into continuous contact

with one another. This is represented in a model with four quadrants where two

independent dimensions—maintenance of heritage, culture, and identity, and

involvement or identification with aspects of their societies of settlement, show how a

person might identify or disidentify with either their home culture or their host culture

(Ngo, 2008). This is orthogonally represented as four sectors: assimilation, separation,

marginalization, and integration. (Berry, 2005). However, Rudmin (2003) has strong

critiques on Berry's popular approach to acculturation. In his article, he analyzed the

fourfold approach and highlighted its weakness and lack of clarity. At first, he mentioned

that acculturation has an extensive focus on minorities and noted that only a few fourfold

studies exist that show how people from dominant or majority cultures adopted

characteristics of minority culture (p. 6). Additionally, he mentioned that the fourfold

acculturation approach is always defined in a passive voice, for example, "leaving it

unclear whether or not the minority chose it" (p. 17). As in the case of international

students who are non-European and/or non-white and are considered a minority, most

acculturation studies implied that acculturation is something that happened only to

minority people. According to Johnston, "this is one step down the road of racism" (as cited in Rudmin, 2003, p. 6). In short, this work lacks a critical lens.

Conversely, it is important to be aware that "acculturation is a dual process and psychological change that take place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members" (Berry, 2005, p. 698). Berry (2005) argued that the psychological change is a long-term process, which means that, in a sojourners case, the process of acculturation would not be fully experienced. He further talks about the limitations of acculturation as one that proceeded at different degrees; some adapt to the dominant culture while others developed resistance due to cultural stress.

In regard to studies related specifically to international students, it seems that most of the articles and theories were based on assimilation and acculturation. These studies operate under the assumption that the international students studied are attempting to mold their foreign personality to adjust to a new, more Western, white, European-American personality and identity. This process is understood in critical theory studies as an act of racism and goes against theories with a focus on cultural pride, identity, and social justice (Thomas et al., 2018). Even when race or ethnicity is not specifically a factor, not acknowledging uniqueness and difference is even considered to be oppression (hooks, 2000).

In addition to other cultural differences, language barriers combine with a variety of psychological as well as social factors that impact how well a person adapts to a new culture (Schumann, 1978). Schumann (1978) notes that language acquisition and acclimation to a new culture are positively related when six factors are visible. Both the

learner and persons from the new culture view each other as social equals, they integrate themselves with the host culture, they share various social services (for example, grocery stores, medical offices, and government resources), they are able to find commonalities between the two cultures, they view each other positively, and they make time to be with each other. These factors create a frame of reference not only for the second language learner but also for the people in the host culture. However, this framework does not incorporate the impact that race, ethnicity, or religion would have either on the sojourner or on the people in the host culture. I discuss the impact of discrimination on international students in the next section.

Lastly, other critiques of acculturation theory exist due to its poor testability in empirical research regarding cultural stress as well as its lack of logic (Rudmin, 2003; Sakamoto, 2007; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). My project used qualitative methods as well as a critical theoretical framework, the relationship to positivist research is not relevant to this project but it is still worthwhile to note.

Discrimination

Discrimination is considered a potential factor of cultural stress. Non-white international students from Asia, Africa, India, Latin America, and the Middle East often perceive discrimination behaviors (Hanassab, 2006; Lee & Rice, 2007). In their interview-based research, Lee and Rice (2007) found that international students from Asia, India, Latin America, and the Middle East reported different types of discrimination, from feeling inferior to receiving direct verbal insults.

When investigating the experiences of Saudi international students, Young and Snead (2017) also highlighted that the students in their study faced discrimination and social isolation from both their own culture and the host culture. Furthermore, Hanassab (2006) researched international students' experience in the U.S. regarding the level of discrimination they face and found "that the international students from the Middle East and Africa experienced more difficulty regarding stereotyping and discrimination" (p. 168). This could be attributed to possible stereotypes that the host culture holds toward Muslims from the Middle East in the post-9/11 world, as well as attitudes towards African Americans. Additionally, he suggested, "promoting cross-cultural communication and efforts toward tolerance among people of different customs and values. This can advance learning across cultures, build respect among different peoples, and encourage construction of a global community" (p. 170). It is important that host countries' universities as well as researchers are proactive in addressing issues of discrimination towards international students.

Several studies included specific experiences of discrimination experienced by women. For example, Bonazzo and Wong (2007) employed a grounded theory approach to represent Japanese women's experience of discrimination, prejudice, and stereotypes in U.S. higher education, stating that "[I]international students continue to experience stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination on university campuses" (p. 637). As a result, discrimination has a significant effect on the educational performance of international students, which leads to isolation as well as avoiding communication with their peers and teachers in schools.

Using a critical approach, Lee, Park, and Kim (2009) found that international female students at universities deal with power structures due to gender differences and that these experiences are a key component in understanding what international students grapple with in their studies abroad. On the other hand, Hsieh (2006a, 2006b, 2007) discusses the role of social relations of power in international students' negotiation of their identity, especially the role of how social interactions within U.S. American society play into that development. "The American ideology of cultural homogeneity, typical of a monolingual society, is the mentality that English is the only language that counts, and language diversity is a problem rather than a resource" (Hsieh, 2006b, p. 870). This language component combined with legacies of racism and other discriminatory U.S. American cultural ideals, negatively impact international students in numerous ways that need to be accounted for in socially just research.

Muslim women may have distinct experiences with discrimination. In Young and Snead's (2017) study of Saudi students, female participants reported feeling that classmates responded negatively to the *hijab*, indicating that this visual cue that they were Muslims may have led to discrimination. However, limited research has focused specifically on the experiences of female Muslim international students.

Islamophobia

Related to discrimination—but far more severe and systematic—is Islamophobia. Islamophobia also has a major impact for Muslim international students, particularly in a post 9/11 United States. Islamophobia can be understood as "unfounded hostility towards Islams. … unfair discrimination against Muslim individuals and communities" (Weedon,

as cited in Saeed, 2015, p. 21). Runnymede Trust (1997) argues that it emerges from the desire of White Supremacy to maintain its power, so it advances an ideology that establishes a powerful dichotomy between Western, White identities and Islamic identities: "'We' are civilized, reasonable, generous, efficient, sophisticated, enlightened, non-sexist. 'They' [Muslims] are primitive, violent, irrational, scheming, disorganized, oppressive" (p. 6). It is a more specific version of xenophobia, which Lean (2017) defines as "the fear or intense dislike of foreigners" (p. 7). He continues by stating that the term 'foreigners' is used to describe a group of people not deemed to be a part of the group that is deploying the word. "They are considered to be outsiders that come from other countries and whose values and cultures are different. The predominant sentiment among many right-wing Americans regarding Muslims…is that they are not welcome in 'our' country" (p. 8).

According to GhaneaBassiri (2013), Islamophobia in the United States is not a new phenomenon and has been around since ever. Although not much research had been done regarding public opinion and U.S. attitudes about Muslims, there is documented information regarding negative attitudes about Islam. However, public opinions post-9/11 have been unfavorable. In addition, classifying Muslims for the purposes of research has been difficult as researchers have had trouble figuring out how the U.S. American public conceptualizes Muslims, whether as a religion, a culture, a race, or an ideological group (GhaneaBassiri, 2013, p. 55). GhaneaBassiri continues by saying that the media has fed this issue with classification as it highlights stories about violence rather than coverage religious practices or individual practitioners. Lean (2012) also associates media

campaigns with Islamophobia, becoming an industry that "whip[s] up public fear of Muslims" (p. 66).

Islamophobia impacts Muslim students by U.S. institutions, particularly when these students are international or are studying abroad (particularly in regard to travel bans that target Muslim-majority countries) (Boggs, 2017). Many Muslim students as well as faculty and staff report blatant discrimination as well as microaggressions in their daily interactions with peers, colleagues, and the public at large (Bodine Al-Sharif & Pasque, 2016).

Hart (2016) used a phenomenological approach to look into the lived experiences of Muslim students and their academic achievement despite Islamophobia. In her findings she referred to many factors (themes) that played an impact Islamophobia on the students' lives. The influence of negative media reporting of Islam and Muslims had made them subject to racial attacks, and it made it socially acceptable to be subjected to such attacks.

Ciftic (2012) explains the negative images are used to justify any acts of prejudice against certain groups. These negative images, along with Suleiman's (1999) finding that many Americans are unwilling to change a perception when the perception is being accepted, make Islamophobia a difficult irrationally and form of oppression to address. Additionally, one effect of having to deal with Islamophobia is that it may make Muslims feel socially isolated (Khan & Eklund, 2012).

Theoretical Frameworks

> I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing. (hooks, 1994, p. 59)

In this research, I used two main theories that influenced my project, transformative learning theory (TLT) and critical race feminism (CRF). Both theories have informed many of my choices in regard to researching the experiences of Saudi international women students' processes and practices that influence their studies at higher education institutions in the United States. The use of both theories together recognizes that critical theory alone cannot be used to explain the entirety of an educational experience, although it needs to be as broad and inclusive as possible (Brookfield, 2005). Below I will explain the significance and valuable contributions of these theories to my research interests.

Critical Theory and Critical Pedagogy

As both theories that I used are based in critical theory and critical pedagogy, it is important to provide context to them before delving deeper into either one. According to Kincheloe (2008), critical theory may be understood as a "social theory oriented toward critiquing and changing society as a whole" (p. 34). It is grounded in several generations of German philosophers and social theorists in the Western European Marxist tradition

known as the *Frankfurt School*. The Frankfurt School refers to a group of German-American theorists who developed powerful analyses of changes in Western capitalist societies that occurred since the classical theory of Marx (e.g., Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Leo Lowenthal, and Erich Fromm). Critical theory seeks to improve understanding of society by integrating all the major social sciences, including economics, sociology, history, political science, anthropology, and psychology (Kincheloe, 2008).

By extension, Kincheloe (2008) explains that critical pedagogy seeks to expand on critical theory as it "is grounded on the social and educational vision of justice and equality" (p. 6-7). He states that critical pedagogy's vision is similarly grounded in social, cultural, intellectual, economic and political contexts, but expands this notion to understand schooling as a part of a larger set for human services and community development. In addition, Shapiro (2006) states that critical pedagogy calls social order into question and challenges our cultural beliefs.

This commitment calls for a dialogue in order to make connection with students that allows a space where the educators are not the only valid source of knowledge and information; students should also be welcome to bring their own knowledge to the classroom in order to feel respected and to develop a sense of belonging to the practice of education For instance, Giroux (2011) writes that personal experience becomes a valuable resource, one that gives students the opportunity to relate their own narratives, social relations, and histories to what is being taught. Students locate themselves in the concrete conditions of their daily lives while furthering their understanding of the limits

often imposed by those conditions. Since dialogue is an essential component in the act of liberation, knowledge is a mutual creation that is rooted in collaboration. The knowledge-making is historically and socially contextualized. In order for a transformative education to take place, a critical inquiry is required.

Therefore, critical pedagogy should be dialectical; it is about self and social awareness. This awareness is akin to Freire's (2010) call for critical consciousness that represents things as they exist in their natural circumstances and allows us to be open to the concept of change as what is perceived as true now might not be true in the future. It is through this grounding that I situated my work, particularly as it connects to critical race feminism.

Critical Race Feminism

Critical race feminism (CRF) is an outgrowth and convergence of critical race theory and feminist theory. According to Verjee (2012),

> Critical race feminism seeks to understand how society organizes itself along intersections of race, gender, class, and other forms of social hierarchies. It utilizes counter-storytelling as methodology and legitimizes the voices of women of color in speaking about social oppression. (p. 57)

CRF is derived from critical legal studies and critical race theory (CRT), which can be understood as "a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 2). CRT has several basic principles. The most relevant principle for this project is that racism is "normal, not aberrant, in American society" (Delgado, 1995, p. xiv).

While CRT centers the experiences of marginalization on people of color, CRF takes this a step further by centering the experiences of women of color.

Childers-McKee and Hytten (2015) emphasized the need to use CRF as a theoretical lens in education studies concerning females of color. "A fundamental premise of critical theories in education, including CRF, is that we must understand the larger social systems and structures that impact on the educational realities of marginalized students" (Childers-McKee & Hytten, 2015, p. 20). Wing (1996) suggests that CRF unapologetically centers women's experience. At the same time, Childers-McKee and Hytten (2015) mentioned that CRF adds to feminism by continuing to disrupt the idea that there is a single female experience (namely, that of the white, middle class woman). Instead, CRF uses an intersectional approach that "explores the lives of those facing multiple discrimination on the basis of their race, gender, and class revealing how all of these factors interact within a system of white male patriarchy and racist oppression" (Wing, 1997, II. Critical Race Feminism section, para. 6). As international women, particularly women of color, face discrimination and isolation forced by the dominant Western ideology based on their skin color, it is important to employ CRF while exploring international Arabic women students' experiences.

CRF recognizes, addresses, and accepts the experiences of a women of color with an ethnicity that differs from the dominant one. Because of this, CRF suits this dissertation research, not only because of what it can offer to understanding my participants, but also as it addresses my intersecting identities: Saudi Arabian, woman, international student, researcher, feminist, mother, and others. This work is therefore a

natural extension of my viewpoints and interests (Bettez, 2012, p. 8). By utilizing the ideology of critical race feminism, I could highlight the stories told by my sister Saudi international students, who came all the way from the other side of the world, to gain knowledge in order to better understand their shifting identities.

I previously identified one possible limitation of CRF as not taking international experiences into consideration in the same manner as race, class, and gender. Additionally, in this case, the understandings of class in Saudi Arabia impact how it is incorporated, and left unacknowledged at times, in the study. Class, like race and gender, is a socially-constructed identity category. This means that it can be, and is, understood and enacted differently depending on context. In the context of Saudi Arabia, where tribal associations are very important—something without an equivalency in the United States—class does not take shape in the same way as it does in Western society. People are more concerned about what tribe someone is than they are with the economic status of the person.

As a similarly identified researcher, I am fully aware of the complexity of this process and believe CRF is best partnered with another theory that originated from critical theory so that I can detect how identity and knowledge change over time for Saudi international women. Because of this, I have chosen transformative learning theory as it allows for this capacity of in-depth praxis with CRF to center women's experiences in order to acknowledge the multi-dimensionality of their personhood.

Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative learning theory (TLT) was first developed by Mezirow (1978) when he studied American women returning to postsecondary study or the workplace in order to, "identify factors that characteristically impede or facilitate" (p. 6). TLT focuses on the study of adult education and it is influenced by the Frankfurt school as well as informed by Paulo Freire's (2010) conscientization theory. Freire (2010) explained *conscientization* as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions—developing a critical awareness—so that individuals can take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (p. 19). Conscientization places an emphasis on free thought as well as developing a consciousness that is transformative to one's reality. In other words, transformative learning is "a deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings, and action" (Transformative Learning Centre, 2004).

Mezirow's (1978) perspective focuses on the way that critical awareness is a process that is emancipatory, as well as how psychological and sociocultural beliefs bind not only our identities but our relationships as well (p. 6). By allowing ourselves room to undo these bindings, we can more thoroughly integrate different types of learning, including personal experience, as valid sources of knowledge (p. 6). He theorizes this with a description of three different types of learning: instrumental, dialogic, and self-reflective (Mezirow, 1985). Simply stated, learners ask how they could best learn the information (instrumental), when and where this learning could best take place (dialogic), and why they are learning the information (self-reflective). Within each of the three learning types, three learning processes operate: learning within meaning schemes,

learning new meaning schemes, and learning through meaning transformation (Kitchenham, 2008, p. 111).

Essentially, TLT is about learning and changes in our personal perspectives that transform our lives as well as how we see and understand ourselves, our context, and the world around us. It is a process of calling our old understandings and past experiences into question due to something new in our lives or epiphanies, and then attributing new meanings to our lives and experience.

As TLT is rooted in critical pedagogy it is important to note that, "Critical pedagogy induce students to question those power plays that lead to human suffering" (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 34). In addition, "critical pedagogy is attuned to the importance of complexity in constructing a rigorous and transformative education" (p. 36). Because of this, as critical educators we must "recognize the complexity of the lived world with its maze of uncontrollable variables, irrationality, non-linearity, and unpredictable interaction of wholes and parts" (p. 37). An acknowledgement and understanding of the ways that power intersects with lived experience must occur in order for a learning experience to truly be transformative.

This maps onto Kincheloe's (2008) discussion of Freire's work. "Freire talked about the inseparability of learning and being (ontology). Learning from Freire's perspective is grounded in the learners' own being, their interaction with the world, their vision of what they can become" (as cited in Kincheloe, 2008, p. 73). TLT therefore is a vehicle that can make explicit connections between learning, identities, and culture while acknowledging the messiness and non-linearity that is a part of the human experience.

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TLT has been used in a variety of ways in the literature. For example, Lyon (2001) used it explore the adaptations and transformative effects for women educators working in the United States. In addition, Mwebi and Brigham (2009) draw on transformative learning to inform their analysis of Canadian preservice teachers' experiences in Africa and their resulting perspectives on the learning process, improved intercultural competencies, as well as professional development. Hamza (2010) used it to explore the intersection of international experience for female faculty members working at universities in Arab-speaking countries and how these experiences related to their professional development. TLT is therefore a theory that could allow my me to provide insight, based on the data, on the ways that female Saudi international students experience their experiences in the United States.

Through the years, TLT has been critiqued as well. According to Cranton and Taylor (2012), Mezirow's original vision of TLT was to describe the process of learning transformation at an individual level, one that maps onto a more constructivist methodology. However, without a critical analysis of the social using a critical theoretical framework, the "social structures that are the basis of inequities and oppression" are ignored (p. 9). It is with this lens that Brookfield (2005) describes the seven learning tasks that must be used to ground TLT in a critical theory perspective: (1) challenging ideologies, (2) contesting hegemony, (3) unmasking power, (4) overcoming alienation, (5) learning liberation, (6) reclaiming reason, and (7) practicing democracy. Each of these tasks is described in more detail in figure 1.

Brookfield's Task	Definition
(1) challenging ideologies	Challenging "ideologies embedded in language, social habits, and cultural forms"
(2) contesting hegemonies	Pushing back against structures that are seen as normal because they are embedded in society.
(3) unmasking power	"recognizing how power is exercised in our own lives in everyday actions"
(4) overcoming alienation	Developing "free agency and to realize how our lives are shaped by our social contexts"
(5) learning liberation	Learning to push back against one-dimensional ways of thinking
(6) reclaiming reason	"Applying reason to examining how our lives have been shaped by the lifeworld"
(7) practicing democracy	Using "rational discourse, paying attention to ideal speech conditions, increasing our awareness of the contradictions inherent in the ideal of democracy, and pay attention to power structures related to diversity"

Figure 1. Brookfield's Seven Learning Tasks (as cited in Cranton & Taylor, 2012, p. 9)

Each of these tasks can unmask the hidden curriculum of whitewashing the international student experience for female Saudi students, particularly when combined with CRF. These tasks will be used as a priori codes for data analysis and described in more detail in Chapter III.

Conclusion

As both of these theories are grounded in critical pedagogy, they pair well in capturing a more holistic view of how international Saudi women students pass through the different phases of changing identity formation and development as well as their

feelings and any resulting actions. Both provide their own multidimensional view of the ways people construct their identities and their knowledge projects and allow for the contradictions and messiness that is an inherent component of the human experience. The literature reviewed demonstrates that there is a lack of critical research that takes into account the various intersecting identity categories that make up this population and lacks an analysis of the ways in which power structures and hierarchies impact how these women interact with them. It is in this gap that I situate this dissertation.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

As an international Arab woman and a student who has been studying in the United States since 2009, I have faced difficulties adjusting to the host country in many facets of my lived experience, including social and academic challenges. As a part of the student body at the university I attended, I felt pressure from my peers because of my color and my foreign accent and this became part of my new normal day-to-day interactions. When I speak, I notice how people act as if I am not speaking English because of my accent. When I tell others my story, I notice looks from people that tell me they do not truly care about who I am or how I came to be here. I always anticipate a look or reaction, related either to my gender, brownness or my nationality. While looking for answers that address these challenges in three areas of my life (social, cultural, and academic), I realized a transformation occurred for me between these areas, combined with the struggle of being female in a world that always refers to you as the "second sex" (Weiss, 2016).

I chose a qualitative approach informed by phenomenology as a research method because it can highlight transformations like mine and, combined with critical pedagogy, its goal is to reveal that which is hidden and to deeply explore the phenomenon of learning hand-in-hand with understanding social structures (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, &

Taubman, 2004). Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman (2004) explain that phenomenology can offer an opportunity to study individual lived experience, including the ways that surrounding systems contextualize and influence that experience. It specifically seeks to illustrate and analyze how the social environment combines with a person's past in order to impact the person's current educational experiences (p. 416).

Research Questions

Through a phenomenological method of interviewing international Saudi women students, I address the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of international Saudi women students in U.S. colleges and universities?

    a. What social, cultural, and academic challenges have they faced?

    b. What do they perceive as positive social, cultural, and academic experiences?

2. How do the educational experiences and knowledge gained from being an international student in the United States influence how they view themselves?

Theoretical Frameworks

As described in Chapter II, two theories were used in this research: transformative learning theory (TLT) and critical race feminism (CRF). These were used together to form the research questions and guide my data analysis. As TLT was used more extensively in the data analysis, I will describe it in more detail below.

Brookfield's (2005) conception of TLT has seven tasks that address adult learning. Although many of these are interrelated and overlap in their definitions as well

as mechanisms, they address different aspects of the learning process. They are briefly described in the table in Chapter II as well as in more detail below.

Challenging Ideologies

Challenging ideologies is about critiquing ideology to uncover what lies beneath dominant cultural assumptions. For the purposes of my work, ideology represents "the system of ideas and values that reflects and supports the established order and that manifests itself in our everyday actions, decisions, and practices, usually without our being aware of its presence" (Brookfield, 2005, p. 67). Part of this process is not only recognizing the different ideas and beliefs that shape our world but figuring out what value these ideologies hold in a person's life.

Contesting Hegemony

According to Brookfield (2005), hegemony is understood "an idea that understands the maintenance of political control as involving adult education and learning. It describes the way that people learn to accept as natural and in their own best interest an unjust social order" (p. 43). Therefore, according to Brookfield (2005), the task of *contesting hegemony* is to have adults "learn to recognize hegemony in the beliefs and assumptions they live by and the structures they live within" (p. 46).

Unmasking Power

Unmasking power is a process that goes beyond the first two tasks as "It investigates how adults learn to decide when power is being exercised responsibly and how they learn to defend themselves against its unjust and arbitrary use" (Brookfield,

2005, p. 49). This process adds to challenging ideologies and contesting hegemony as it begins to push against these power dynamics.

Overcoming Alienation

When a person is engaging in the tasks above (whether consciously or not), many adult learners deal with feelings of alienation. Therefore, the concept of *overcoming alienation* is related to the concept of freedom and "free agency where they feel they possess the desire, capacity, and resources to shape the world according to their desires" (Brookfield, 2005, p. 53). This concept of desire is important in that it can shape a person's reality as well as their engagement with various social systems, particularly in higher education.

Learning Liberation

Liberation is central to a critical understanding of one's self and how a person situates themselves in a variety of sociocultural settings. The Oxford Dictionary (2018) defines liberation as "The action of setting someone free from imprisonment, slavery, or oppression; release…Freedom from limits on thought or behaviour." Thus, *learning liberation* can be as simple as recognizing and claiming one's preferred method of learning in an education setting. For some students in higher education settings, this can relate to a choice of degree program or major, choice of research topic, or even the type of capstone experience they engage in (for example, an internship, additional coursework, or a major research project such as a thesis).

Reclaiming Reason

Critical reflection on cultural concepts such as capitalism and beauty norms is at the heart of the sixth task of TLT. This practice of *reclaiming reason* is at the heart of civil discourse and allows people to think logically and critically about several facets of everyday life, including education. For many Muslim women in the United States, this can include deciding whether or not to wear *hijab* and in what contexts. This task can be directly tied with the final task as well as it relates to being able to "walk in another person's shoes" and recognize shared humanity as people.

Practicing Democracy

Although Brookfield (2005) emphasizes that democracy can sometimes be a word that gets used in ways that sometimes render it somewhat meaningless, it is used in the context of *practicing democracy* in a way to refer to the vast number of ways that people live their lives and experience their realities. In reference to adult learners specifically, he asks,

> how do adult learners learn to explore and respond to 'otherness,' to alterity, to the diversity of identities, values, desires, and expressive forms they encounter in democratic communication? How do they learn to avoid the premature closure of conversation occasioned by having to choose between mutually exclusive options? (p. 65)

These seven tasks form the conceptual framework that I used in this dissertation to inform my interpretation of the lived experiences of interviewing international Saudi women students studying in the United States. Due to the fact that these tasks are interrelated as well as TLT's basis in critical theory, I feel that a qualitative research

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design was best suited to addressing my research questions. In addition, qualitative research design allows for the participants to delve into and explore their own experiences through conversations with the researcher through the interviews.

Research Design

I used a qualitative research design based in phenomenology to understand the meaning and interpretation of the phenomenon of international Saudi women students' experiences while studying in the U.S. (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). In my study, the phenomenon is a unique sample of a minority group in the body of university culture. Creswell (2013) explained that there are two main approaches to phenomenological research, hermeneutical phenomenology and transcendental phenomenology. Both types of phenomenological research aim to study the life experiences of the participants. They differ in that hermeneutical phenomenology focuses more on the researcher's interpretations of the themes emerged through the texts and transcendental phenomenology describes the experiences of the participants while acknowledging the researcher's biases (Creswell, 2013).

In my research, I chose to use aspects of transcendental phenomenology because my participants' life experiences and voices are largely missing from the existing academic literature. This aligns with Creswell's description of transcendental phenomenological research as it gives the researcher the opportunity to learn about what the participants have in common, as well as "describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of concept or real phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, p. 76).

In addition, transcendental phenomenological research is generally viewed as part of the constructivist paradigm (Creswell, 2013) as it accepts multiple socially constructed realities and how those realities impact interactions between the researcher and the participants, while working together to co-construct knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation (Hatch, 2002). However, it can be used with critical theories in order to acknowledge the complexity in experience as well as create a basis for change (Rafferty, 2011; Weiss, 2016), which was how it was deployed in this research. In my analysis of their interviews, I also applied critical race feminist theory to identify the racialized and gendered themes of their experiences. As part of transcendental phenomenology, my critical paradigm assisted in making these themes more apparent to me.

Creswell (2013) further connects transcendental phenomenology to the work of Moustakas (1994) because it includes systematic steps for data analysis as well as provides useful guidelines for writing the text and structuring descriptions. The process starts with the researcher deciding if the research problem can be best understood by using a phenomenological approach. The researcher then decides if the phenomenon itself can be identified.

Once the phenomenon has been identified, the data collected should be from relevant participants (in this case, interviewing international Saudi women students studying in the U.S.) using multiple in-depth interviews. Although specific questions in the interviews vary, Creswell (2013) states that two general questions should be asked to the participants in order to capture the essence of the phenomenon: "What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts or situations have typically

influenced or affected your experience of the phenomenon?" (p. 81). During data

analysis, significant quotes and themes are identified which allow the researcher to use

the data collected to write a textual description of the phenomenon.

It is worth noting that Creswell recommends acknowledging personal biases

separately instead of including them in the data analysis and suggests that they can be

placed in a number of locations in the research write-up, including the introduction of the

study, a positionality statement, or in the discussion (p. 82). This process is referred to in

phenomenology as reflexive bracketing. Researchers that use transcendental

phenomenology as a research approach should keep their personal perspectives in mind

in order to keep them from clouding the essences of the studied phenomenon (Creswell,

2013; Gearing, 2004).

Therefore, in this research I used reflexive memoing as an ongoing process to

continually acknowledge my positionality in this project (Gearing, 2004). This is

especially important as a critical researcher as I need to be aware of my positionality, and

my biases toward this phenomenon are related to my own personal experiences as an

international Saudi woman student studying in the U.S. This method of critical reflexivity

also allows for the breaking down of hegemonic barriers and allows the lived experience

of participants to shine in the research (Pinar et al., 2004; Rafferty, 2011).

Participants

In this section I identify the participant selection criteria and procedures. I then

provide an overview of each of the participants.

Selection Criteria

As phenomenological research requires rich, in-depth information from people who have experienced a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013), I used a purposeful sampling strategy. I recruited eight international Saudi women students currently residing in Saudi Arabia who had completed an undergraduate or graduate degree from a university in the Southeast U.S. and had been in the U.S. for at least two years. This requirement ensured that they had been in the United States for a sufficient amount of time to have a more rounded experience as an international student. This sample included women who were a variety of veiled and unveiled students (during their time in the U.S.) to investigate if this symbol of Islamic appearance (*hijab*) changed the phenomenon.

Selection Procedure

As Saudi international woman students, our social community is a close-knit community, with everyone basically knowing everyone. I invited the women who fulfilled my selection criteria to my study by a number of means, including face-to-face, email, and telephone. After identifying my potential participants, I emailed each one asking her for permission to participate in my research. After receiving initial approval, I met with each one, gained rapport, explained the three-interview procedure, explained my consent form, and gained the final approval to start my research. It is important to note that each interview was conducted in Arabic and all materials used were given to the participants in English. However, rapport-building happened in either English or Arabic.

Participant Descriptions

Initially, I intended to interview students in the U.S. who were currently students. I approached several female friends who I knew in the U.S., but because not all of them had the time or were in the same hometown it was hard to get in touch with them. Out of the many attempts, initially six followed up and were willing to be interviewed. It was through the process of conducting my first interviews with two of the women that my research design changed; these two women withdrew from the research study after their first interviews. When I asked them why, they explained that they felt it was too risky to conduct these interviews in the U.S., where their status is precarious. This was an unexpected challenge at the start of the study. Upon reflection, I realize that I needed to change some plans for the study. Specifically, I needed to interview participants who had already returned to Saudi Arabia because such participants were more secure in their status as Saudi citizens. Although this began as a challenge to the research design, I now believe that by interviewing the women in Saudi Arabia after their significant international experience in the U.S., the interviews offered more holistic information because they were able to have some distance from their international experience and, thus, could be more reflective about their learning.

In the beginning, I knew four of my participants (their pseudonym names are Noha, Huda, Lucky, and Honey) through my Saudi social networks when we were in the U.S., and I still had social media connections with them through WhatsApp and Facebook. After they finished their degrees, they returned to Saudi Arabia and had spent at least one year back in their home country. I approached them through WhatsApp and

asked to meet them for coffee and to catch up. I started asking them about their lives and their experiences in settling back in to Saudi life. We talked about how the country had changed and how we had changed as well. After that, I talked about my research and provided a brief description about my topic. They willingly agreed to participate. It seemed to be an opportunity for them to talk about their experiences as well to vent or reminisce about those days and how they had passed so quickly.

At the beginning, all of participants appeared to have the same feelings about having the chance to talk about their experiences and having someone to listen to their experiences. It allowed them to reflect on their stories and how they had changed. For example, Noha illustrated this when she said,

> Noura I really need to do this. I feel different, and I think these interviews might help me as well in reflecting on myself and detecting the changes in me…I feel different, but I don't know how to explain it.

After agreeing verbally to participate in my research, I handed them the recruitment script and asked them to read it. If they agreed to move forward and begin scheduling interview dates and times, I asked them to sign the consent form.

With my first four participants, the conversations were less formal, and they were more open about their feelings and stories. Huda told me that it was a good idea to conduct the interviews in Saudi Arabia. She admitted that if I had asked her to participate when she was in the U.S., she would not have done it. Upon hearing this, I asked her why. She said,

I would have been too scared to risk my scholarship, and I wouldn't dare to say anything about school or my professors. After all, I am a Muslim and you know what they already think about us. Anything might be taken out of context and I would face trouble.

I assured her that everything said in the interview would be kept anonymous. I explained that I would use a pseudonym so that she could not be identified. She said yes she understood that, but she still felt safer now that she was taking part from her own country. This illustrates the uncertainty that she faced in her position as a Saudi international woman studying in the U.S. and begins to reveal the racism she faced.

I conducted all the interviews in Arabic, rather than English. This followed the recommendation of my committee. Additionally, by using their native language, I discovered that the women were able to more fully describe and reflect on their experiences. They did not have to face an additional language barrier that might prevent them from using the most descriptive and precise language to articulate their ideas. In order to protect the identity of the participants I translated the interviews from Arabic to English, and I intentionally use the English version of their responses in the text. This step in the research process further protects the participants' identities in Saudi Arabia because fewer people will be able to read the participants' interviews.

Because of the nature of my research, I feel it is important to provide some details about each of my participants. It is important to know who they are to fully understand their stories. Some of the similarities between all of the women include that they: (a) were born and raised in Saudi Arabia, (b) earned an advanced degree (Masters or PhD) in the United States, (c) currently live and work in Saudi Arabia, (d) are middle to upper-

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middle class, (e) and were first-generation *women* college students. The following descriptions share more details about each participant specifically. Be advised, I have assured confidentiality to the participants. For this reason, some of the details may seem vague, and other details may be excluded. Given the significant accomplishments of these women, providing certain details would make it possible to identify them in Saudi Arabia. Through these descriptions I have tried to respond to the push/pull of thick description for readers with maintaining confidentiality for participants. If there is missing information, it is likely that I purposefully chose to exclude it.

Noha. Noha is a 29-year-old single woman. She stayed in the U.S. for three years and earned a master's degree in law. She did not wear the *hijab* in the United States. She has long light brown hair and rosy cheeks. She has a very confident personality yet is dependent on her family. I knew her briefly through mutual friends, but I only met her several short times when we were in the U.S. because she attended a different university. She has been back home for about one and a half years. She currently works in a private law firm.

Huda. Huda is a 31-year-old married woman who lived in the Southern U.S. for four years with two kids, and our children are friends. Huda has a very calm yet strong personality. She is very tough and has sharp eyes. She is a very wise woman for her age: it's like she has an old soul. She wears the *hijab* in a conservative way her clothes were always long, and she does not use makeup because she "doesn't believe in artificial beauty" and is never afraid to give her opinion. I call her a Saudi-style feminist. She had

been back home in Saudi Arabia for two years when I interviewed her. Huda teaches at an academy for adult learners.

      Lucky. Lucky is a 28-year-old woman who did not wear the *hijab* in the United States. She is very outgoing. She loves life but is a strong, hard headed girl. She has accomplished a lot for her young age. She was a school principal when she was 24 and that is rare to be a principal at her age back home. She always likes to take the lead if she had the chance to, and she is successful in that. Her strong personality, confidence, and feminist outlook allowed her to get nominated to hold leadership positions back home before coming to the U.S. In fact, her job sent her to pursue her master's degree in the U.S and I had the chance to know her before she graduated and returned home. She left a strong impression on me. Lucky had just returned from the United States when I interviewed her.

      Honey. Honey is 35 years old, has earned a master's degree, and wears the *hijab*. She is very calm, and she speaks very softly. She is married with two children. She is a very introverted person, but she was still very happy to share her experiences and to tell her story. I met her on several occasions and based on my personal observation of her character found her to be very calm with a very beautiful smile. She does not get involved in group conversations unless she is explicitly included. When I interviewed her, she had been back in Saudi Arabia for about one and a half years. I found it more difficult to build rapport with Honey than with the other women. She seemed more reserved and politer, which made me sometimes wonder if her answers were diplomatic or honest.

Since I did not have enough participants, I asked my husband to introduce me to some of his female colleagues. I was lucky that one of his colleagues was his classmate when they both studied for a Masters in Jordan. Dr. Manal was kind enough to allow me entrance to the University and to meet some doctors who had completed one or two degrees in the U.S. I introduced myself to them and only one agreed to work with me, but through snowball sampling I managed to meet the last five participants. I emailed my recruitment scripts ahead of time before meeting them personally. They agreed to meet me and gave me a suitable time to meet. My meetings took place in their offices during their break times and occurred every other week as suggested by Seidman (2006). At first, we talked about ourselves briefly to break the ice. As much as it was very professional in the beginning, I ended up having good relationships with them.

Sara. Sara looked like a very sophisticated woman. She has a calming and serene appearance and wore the *hijab* in the U.S. Sara has a PhD in chemistry. She is 39 years old and has five children. She was very welcoming, and she gave her full attention during the interviews. It felt good that she was very interested in participating and being involved in a research project. She was very thorough and exact in arriving on time. She was also very detailed in the telling of her stories. After our last meeting she told me that reflecting on transformation was enlightening to her. She recently returned from the U.S. from her studies and is currently a chemistry professor at a university.

Nesma. Nesma studied in the U.S. from senior high school through to her bachelors, master's, and PhD degrees. Nesma is also 39 years old. She is married with five children. Her PhD is in special education. She has a very nice personality. She did

not wear the *hijab* in her high school or during her bachelor's degree in the U.S., but she did wear it during her graduate degrees. Nesma has been back in Saudi Arabia for three years and is an Associate professor in her department.

Amal. Amal is a younger professor. She is 32 years old and married with three children. Her PhD is in math and she wore the *hijab* while in the United States. Amal's personality is very practical and very insightful. During the interviews, she always linked some of her behaviors in some stories to her upbringing and how it influenced her life decisions. It is worth mentioning that Amal lived in a household led by a female as her father died at a young age, and she never met her grandfather. She lived with her mother and grandmother. Amal has been back in Saudi Arabia for about two years.

Salma. Salma is the oldest participant. She is 54 years old, and she is a professor of chemistry. Her stories and experiences were very different than the others since she studied in the U.S. before 9/11. She is married with four adult children, one of whom is currently studying medicine in the United States. Interviewing her provided some different insights into my topic. Salma has the darkest skin tone of all the women I interviewed, which becomes a relevant topic in Chapter IV.

I have mentioned in the participant descriptions whether or not each participant chose to wear *hijab* in the United States. In Saudi Arabia it is expected that all women will wear the *hijab*; it is part of the Saudi culture as well as Islamic religion. The Qur'an, which requires the *hijab*, is both a religious text and the legal framework for all law in Saudi Arabia; religion and law are inextricably linked. As Ruby (2006) described, the *hijab* is the "Muslim women's dress code" (p. 55). When the participants study in the

United States, *hijab* is no longer a legal requirement, so the choice to wear *hijab* becomes one of religious and personal meaning. Each participant's experience of being a Saudi international student is diverse yet connected in various ways that will be discussed in the results chapters as well as the discussion. These experiences were collected using the methods described in the next section on data collection.

Methods of Data Collection

Qualitative researchers use interviews frequently in research methods because they serve as a direct access to participants' lived stories (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). More specifically, interviews give space for the "voice" of the participant to be amplified (Pillow, 2003). Because of this, the use of interviews is integral to phenomenology.

Creswell (2013) stated that a phenomenological research approach requires the use of multiple semi-structured interviews with broad, open-ended interview questions in combination with reflexive journaling to the bracket researcher's assumptions. In order to capture the essence of the phenomenon with enough depth, each interview should take at least one to one and a half hours, and each participant should be interviewed three times (Seidman, 2006). In my study, I used this three-interview method for interviewing my participants using semi-structured interviews that can be seen in Appendix A. Each interview took place in the location of the participant's choosing (four in their offices, two in quiet public places, and two in their homes) to allow the participant to feel comfortable and able to talk freely. At the beginning of each interview, I took five to ten minutes to break the ice and build rapport with each participant. In addition, each

interview took place in a span of two weeks with at least three days in between, as per the protocol laid out by Seidman (2006). This allowed the participant time to reflect on the previous interview. Each of the three interviews has its own focus, as described in figure 2.

Interview	Purpose of Interview
Interview 1	Detailed life history in relation to the topic researched
Interview 2	Detailed present lived experience in relation to the topic researched
Interview 3	Reflection on the meaning of the topic researched

Figure 2. Three Phases of Phenomenological Interviewing, based on Sedman (2006)

If unexpected circumstances arise, Seidman (2006) has found that it is reasonable to combine interviews in one day with reasonable results. Due to the unexpected nature of student schedules, this occurred for two participants (Lucky and Noha), where the second and third interviews were combined. I did this because the participants' schedules were very constricted, and they could not meet for two more interviews. Since I combined interviews two and three for them, these interviews lasted a little longer.

I designed my interview protocol in order to allow my participants to express their own opinions. The questions were designed based on categories that reflect the theoretical frameworks of the study (CRF and TLT), and are highly focused on how they navigate their lives as international students in the U.S. I asked interviewing international

Saudi women students studying in the U.S., who were not participants, to review the questions I developed to see if they were clear, understandable, and best captured their full stories. One useful piece of feedback they provided me included focusing on educational and academic questions as a way to better understand the participants' personalities.

In the primary interview questions, I added follow-up probes to gain more nuanced information from participants. For example:

- Can you tell me more about….?;

- How did that make you feel?;

- Why do you think …. happened?.

- What do you mean by …?

- Can you tell me more about…?

As data analysis in studies based in phenomenology typically consist of creating themes and textual descriptions of the phenomenon through examination of transcripts (Creswell, 2013), interviews were recorded to allow for transcripts to be produced. Each interview was recorded electronically by using two devices concurrently; I used an iPhone recording app and a Sony digital recorder as recommended by Creswell (2013). Each audio file was stored on a password-protected laptop in my possession for data security. The interviews were transcribed by a paid transcriber, translated from Arabic to English by me, and analyzed in conjunction with my reflexive journals. Overall, there were 23 hours of audio interviews that were transcribed and analyzed for this study.

Before analyzing the interview data, I allowed participants to check their interview transcripts to allow any corrections or additions to their statements. I heard from all of the participants that they reviewed the transcripts and did not have any feedback. The participants' checked transcripts were then analyzed, which will be described in more detail in the section on trustworthiness.

Methods of Data Analysis

After conducting the interviews of all eight participants, files of interviews were sent to a paid professional transcriber who also signed a confidentiality agreement form. To ensure trustworthiness of the study and before analyzing the data, I used the participant checking strategy as suggested by Creswell (2013) and Maxwell (2013). I uploaded each transcript to a password-protected Box file and sent individual links to each participant via email. Each participant had her own password and could only access her own transcript. The link remained valid for a two-week period so she could add clarifications and make changes if she chose. In the email, I individually told each participant that she had the right to clarify or add comments in the transcript, as well as the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

The data was analyzed using both of the theoretical frameworks for guidance. In particular, TLT's seven learning tasks were used in developing the interview questions and was used in interpreting and analyzing the data collected using the code-forming strategy. I also analyzed the remaining interview data using open-coding to avoid missing any valuable data (Creswell, 2013; Maxell, 2013).

The strategy I used to analyze the data followed five steps:

1. Organize the data.

2. Read the data.

3. Re-read and memo the data.

4. Describe, classify, and interpret data into codes and themes.

5. Interpret the data in a written form to provide a description of the overall phenomenon.

Using the five steps suggested by both Creswell (2013) and Maxell (2013), I started with the code forming strategy using Brookfield's (2005) seven tasks of TLT to find evidence through significant quotes. Once that had been completed, I used open coding with CRF as my guiding framework to code the rest of the data. This coding was accomplished by combing through the transcripts at least one additional time to look for significant quotes that reflect the participants' lives as female students that are perceived as women of color in the United States.

Data was coded by hand. In addition, my selected themes and subthemes were both member-checked as well as peer-checked with one doctoral student and a doctoral graduate with experience in qualitative research. I considered all of their comments and clarifications in order to reach a consensus about my themes and subthemes (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research design must be addressed in advance in order to employ strategies designed to avoid them as much as possible (Creswell 2013;

Maxwell 2013). One strategy that I used in this study was to use multiple interviews, which increased trustworthiness, because it allowed participants multiple opportunities to provide feedback and input on the ongoing project.

To avoid misrepresenting my participants, I used member checking to verify participant statements. In this trustworthiness strategy, transcripts and notes are sent to participants who are then asked to check if the researcher's statements are accurate and are then able to provide clarification or addition if necessary. As suggested by Creswell (2013) and Maxwell (2013), the transcripts are then altered to match the participants' responses in order to uncover the essence of the phenomenon being investigated from participants' perspectives. Once the themes and subthemes have been uncovered, they are also sent to the participants for their review. While I was prepared to incorporate their feedback into the data analysis, no one provided comment.

The third validation strategy I used was peer checking. I used peer checking at two different phases of the research. First, I asked a Saudi citizen to read the transcripts in Arabic and English to ensure proper translation. Secondly, I worked with a colleague to review the themes and codes. I asked my colleague to examine the codes and relevant quotes in order to come to a consensus about the themes (Creswell 2013; Maxwell 2013).

Ethics

I submitted a proposal to the institutional review board (IRB) for approval. Further, the interview protocols were piloted with one similar participant to check for potential issues. The objective of the pilot interview was "to refine and develop research

instruments, assess the degree of observer bias, frame questions, collect background information, and adapt research procedures" (Creswell, 2013, p.165).

In summary, my study employed a phenomenological qualitative research design to investigate Saudi, female, international students' lived experiences using the combined lenses of critical race feminist theory and transformative learning theory. Interviews were used to collect the data. In Chapters IV and V, I present the results of the data collection and analysis. Themes that were pulled from the participants' descriptions of the phenomenon were used to create textual, structural, and composite description as recommended by Creswell (2013) and Maxwell (2013).

CHAPTER IV

BECAUSE I AM A GIRL

In order to address the two main identity markers that impacted the Saudi female international students I interviewed, I have split my results into two chapters. The current chapter addresses the impact of gender and sexism on their experiences. I chose to place this chapter first because my participants cited gender as the first identity category that impacted their experience studying in the United States, and it was the identity that was most impacted by the international student experience. The next chapter addresses the effect of race and racism on their experiences, including the impact of colorism, *hijab*, accent, and other factors that informed the way my participants were treated as non-white Others. Both chapters use Brookfield's (2005) transformative learning theory (TLT)'s seven tasks (i.e., challenging ideologies, contesting hegemony, unmasking power, overcoming alienation, learning liberation, reclaiming reason, and practicing democracy) as a priori codes to highlight their experiences studying in the United States.

TLT is focused on the way that education can create a process leading to critical awareness and emancipation. I am using this theory to frame the findings because it offers critical investigation of real-life stories and how they changed by viewing their changing selves in relation to the world around them.

In Saudi Arabia, there is an understanding from a very young age that being a *girl* means you have no ultimate right to choose your own path (e.g., educational, vocational,

and social), largely due to patriarchy. Several restrictions are at play in choosing career

paths in the Saudi culture where some fields and jobs are traditionally and historically

gender specific (e.g., law and law enforcement, medicine, drivers, and pilots are

considered appropriate jobs for men, while teaching and banking are appropriate for

women). Some traditionally male career paths are slowly opening up for women; this

shift in culture is demonstrated, for example, in the new (2018) laws allowing women to

legally drive.

Additionally, there are Saudi subcultures, and families influence their choices.

These subcultures generally include various levels of conservatism, where they take pride

in the ways that they enforce historical and traditional lifestyles. Some families embrace

new ways of being while others firmly hold on to the ways they have always been. For

example, Salma said:

> I always wanted to be a doctor, but my mother said no one will marry you, so I
> choose chemistry because I love science. Just because I am a girl, I could not
> pursue medicine…But now if my daughter wants to be a doctor I will support her.

I experienced something similar when I was trying to choose my career path.

When I was a high school student in Saudi Arabia, juniors and seniors had to choose

between two tracks: either science and math or literature. The literature track was much

less rigorous than the science and math track, so graduating in literature would bar me

from getting accepted into science and math programs in college because it is viewed as

easier. While I wanted to become a medical doctor and was being encouraged by my high

school principal to pursue the sciences, my father would not allow it, so I decided to graduate from the literature track.

Many of the women's life decisions were based on the desires of the prominent male figure in their lives, whether it was their father--before they were married—or their husbands. Some of their career decisions were impacted by whether or not their fiancé would support their choice of major, some were influenced by whether or not both parents agreed to their chosen occupation, and others by Saudi culture as a whole. Amal stated, "My decisions are affected by my society." Ultimately it was clear that the notion of being "a girl" played a huge role for the participants in identifying their positionality and how their identities are shifting and transforming.

In this chapter, the participants share their stories of "being a girl." In addition, their learning and personal perspectives of being girls and women have been transformed through telling their stories of their past experiences and understanding the new meanings of their current lives.

In the first interview and during telling their stories, it appeared that their early lived experiences were affected by the influence of their male members of both their immediate and extended families. However, most participants (Amal, Sara, Salma, Nesma, Huda, and Honey) stated that at that time they were okay with the male influence (or control) and how it shaped their experiences. However, during their second and third interviews they started to transform and challenge the common "ideology embedded in their social habits and culture forms" (Brookfield, 2005, p. 46).

By using the seven tasks of transformative learning theory as codes, some of the transformations of their stories can be seen:

Challenging Ideologies

The task of challenging ideologies includes identifying these ideologies "embedded in language, social habits, and cultural forms (Brookfield, 2005, p. 40). Before people can fully challenge an ideology, they must be able to identify it and the ways that it impacts their lives (although many people may not consciously recognize this at the time). For the purposes of my work, ideology represents "the system of ideas and values that reflects and supports the established order and that manifests itself in our everyday actions, decisions, and practices, usually without our being aware of its presence" (Brookfield, 2005, p. 67). This is different from the second task TLT task of "contesting hegemony" in that it is an internal process, whereas the second task of contesting hegemony is an external manifestation of this work. My participants reported a variety of experiences in regard to challenging ideologies, particularly in dealing with Saudi government institutions. Many of them could point to the institutionalized patriarchy inherent within many government institutions, and they brought up ways that they dealt with these interactions. For example, in her first interview Sara said that she always could see how she was treated as an inferior in public places and at governmental places in Saudi Arabia because the men who worked there didn't approach her or even look at her. She said the worst oppression is feeling neglected and ignored. She said that there is not verbal abuse or harassment, but it is more about their behavior, especially the

lack of eye contact. However, Sara mentioned after returning from the USA she feels more empowered and able to act speak up when she feels dismissed. She said:

> I don't like how it feels to me, of being lesser as a human. However, I have the same brain and these things are my own. Going into these institutions, these institutions are made to help everyone, whether they are a woman or a man. Being treated like this makes me feel annoyed...but after having this experience in the United States, I now go and demand my rights, and I stopped feeling bad about it.

Because of her experience studying in the United States, Sara now owns her identity as a person worthy of being treated with dignity.

Similarly, Amal said in her first interview "I don't even like to go in public government places without a man with me." She also said "anyways, the process will be easier when I have a man with me." When she said this, she shook her head repeatedly, showing that this was something that frustrated her.

On the other hand, while gesturing with her hands and in a clipped tone, Lucky said, "I do not even bother going myself if my father or my brother can do the job. After all they [my father or brother] do not care if I come by myself." Her experience included dealing with government places like courts and the education ministry in Saudi Arabia.

In addition to the numerous examples the women shared that occurred at government locations, they also encountered institutionalized patriarchy in other places as well. Nesma specifically talked about her experiences in non-governmental areas of Saudi life. For example, Nesma said she:

> can feel that all the time, not only in public places but in malls as well. If I address a salesman, ask him 'how much is this' and a guy asks after me, the salesman will

> address the guy before he addresses me and will always express interest in a male shopper over a female shopper and that annoys me all the time.

These experiences demonstrate the level of sexism that these participants recognize in their daily lives in Saudi Arabia.

In addition, Noha, Nesma, and Salma wanted to study in the United States for a long time but could not because—at the time—the Saudi scholarship regulations through the Saudi Arabia Cultural Mission (SACM) required that a woman traveling and living abroad must have a male escort (an experience that I myself share with these women). Nesma said that she was initially able to study abroad because of her grandfather as an escort, but the burden of being so far from home was too much for him, so they returned to Saudi Arabia. She decided to get married early so she would be able to come back to the U.S., with her husband as an escort, to continue her studies.

For many of my participants, just recognizing how embedded patriarchy is in their lives in Saudi Arabia was a pathway to challenging the ideology of women being inferior. Some, like Nesma, found ways to push back and achieve their goals. While their study abroad experiences in themselves did not demonstrate the ways that "ideologies embedded in language, social habits, and cultural forms" (Cranton & Taylor, 2012, p. 9) impact the ways they move and experience Saudi culture, they all expressed an understanding of the ways that they have recognized how Saudi cultural ideologies have impacted their lives. Many of the experiences that my participants reported to me relate closely to the second task of TLT, contesting hegemony.

Contesting Hegemony

Similar to the first task, for people to be able to contest hegemony, described by Gross (2011) as a "synonym for dominance or supremacy" (p. 57), they must be able to recognize it in their lives. Contesting hegemony requires "pushing back against structures that are seen as normal because they are embedded in society (Brookfield, 2005, p. 43). While challenging ideologies is largely an internal process, this task is much more active and externally driven. Through my interviews, it was obvious that this played out in both the United States and Saudi Arabia. The participants had to contest hegemony in both contexts and as they maneuvered throughout both cultures. While they were talking, I could tell that they expressed themselves differently in both cultures and they experienced challenges in both contexts and both time frames. This theme was more thoroughly highlighted in the three-interview format because it showed how these factors changed and intertwined. The intersections of these challenges with their other identities will be more thoroughly discussed in the next chapter when I discuss this theme in the context of race and racism.

While in her first interview, Amal discussed the impact of gender in a broad way by stating, "What I really hate is comparison. What men can do, women can't. However, we are both human, and I do believe that what men can do, women can do." This viewpoint likely emerged from being raised in a household led by her mother and grandmother. Because of this, she stated that she never felt like men were necessary in the ways that Saudi culture reinforces the gender binary. Being raised by women gave her a different perspective on Saudi culture even without her study abroad experience. She

also stated that a Women and Gender Studies class she took as an international student broadened her worldview regarding the impact of patriarchy and sexism on her life.

Two participants specifically referred to events that happened in their lives that involved contesting gender-based hegemony. For example, in Sara's first interview she recounted an event that happened when she came back from her study abroad experience.

> People pass me sometimes and approach the male behind me and that was mean. I remember once in a hotel in Makkah the concierge of the front office literally ignored me and addressed the man behind me. At that moment, I flipped and I screamed at the concierge and demanded him to help me first. All this is frustrating for me because I am a girl.

Sara's story demonstrates a common feeling of being invisible when dealing with men in Saudi Arabia. I have experienced this myself on many occasions as well.

Throughout her interviews, which were in her office, Nesma appeared meek yet conversational. However, it was clear that her demeanor and reported experiences did not always reflect each other. Nesma said that all what she wanted was to go and study abroad as she was an A student and wanted to pursue her education in the USA. During her first interview, it became clear that her interactions with the system were complicated. Her desire to study abroad led her to various attempts at negotiating the system to achieve her goal. For instance, she reported that the idea of her traveling by herself was a great dispute in her family. It was a difficult time for her, but ultimately her family suggested that her grandfather come with her. She pushed back against this, and worried about her grandfather becoming homesick. They returned after one year because of his homesickness. Because of her drive, Nesma persisted and fought to come back to

the US to complete her bachelors, masters, and doctoral studies by getting married. It was clear in this interview that her primary motivation for marriage was to achieve her educational goals by working the system to her advantage. She said that when her fiancé proposed to her, she would only agree to it if she could study abroad in the U.S. "I fought back, and I fought. I only agreed to get married if he would come and travel with me." It was unclear if the disconnect between her spoken words and her attitude were a reflection of cognitive dissonance (between Saudi culture and her individual desires) or if she may have changed her behavior because of the interview being conducted in her office.

Not all of the participants spoke about their own thought processes in regard to contesting hegemony, although it was clear in all the interviews that this occurred (albeit in different ways for different women). Their transformative learning journeys have made them aware of cultural norms that exist in both countries and cultures, giving them the opportunity to interrogate ideas and practices that could be changed. This was something that I have experienced as well throughout my experience studying in the United States. Particularly for Nesma and Sara, they both reported that their experience taught them that no one has the right to make decisions on their behalf, which directly relates to the third task of TLT, unmasking power.

Unmasking Power

Unmasking power is about "how adults learn to decide when power is being exercised responsibly and how they learn to defend themselves against its unjust and arbitrary use" (Brookfield, 2005, p. 49). The power dynamic in Saudi Arabia is heavily influenced by sexism and patriarchy. While some of the sexism is based in Islam, much

of Saudi cultural norms for women are even stricter than what is considered *haram* (religiously forbidden). Sexism comes through family-based status. Men have the power to influence and impact the future lives of the women through their life choices. Huda, Amal, Sara, and Honey all said that power influenced their educational choices because they are girls. Huda studied education because everyone in the education field in Saudi Arabia is female. Sara and Amal wanted to be doctors and switched between several departments before they picked chemistry and math, respectively. Sara was accepted for medical school in another city in Saudi Arabia that included a scholarship for language. If she passed her coursework, she would be sent by her university to any university abroad that she wished to attend. However, Sara's mother would not allow it because she would not allow Sara to travel alone. When describing this situation, it was obvious that Sara was making excuses for her family and her culture's attitudes towards women in medicine. She said:

> I was so mad, so mad that I didn't know what to be. I could be an engineer, or a pharmacist. Both of those weren't my aim. So, I chose the one that was closest to medicine and settled on it [chemistry]. There was no use in fighting back because I thought that my mom and dad had my best interests at heart. At the same time, culturally and socially, it wouldn't be acceptable for me to do that [pursue medicine abroad] in my community.

Sara's decision to change her career and to conform to Saudi cultural norms regarding gender are evident in this above quote.

Similarly, in her first interview, Honey explained that she settled on early childhood education because she did not want to fight the cultural expectations. She stated, "Why would I bother?" It reminded me of my own life choices, particularly

discussing my career options with my father. At that young age, I did not have any

intentions of pushing back against such large cultural norms. However, deep inside, if I

had the chance (or if I had been born male), my life choices and opportunities would

definitely have been different. The way Honey said "why bother" reminded me of trying

to ask my father, as a fifteen-year-old girl, if I could pursue a career in medicine. In

hindsight, I understood the power dynamics even if I did not have the words to place on

the experience.

Huda also experienced a conflict between what she desired to do and what she

was able to do. She said:

> If it was my choice, and if I am not a Saudi woman, I would be a pilot. It was my
> dream, forever, but understanding the gender power on us and saving myself from
> drama and fighting a battle that I know that I would eventually lose, I chose
> higher education. At least it's a career, and I don't want to be a stay-at-home
> mom. That's not who I am and not who I want to be.

I was astonished that she wanted to be a pilot because Huda dresses

conservatively (wearing *hijab*, no makeup, and clothing that loosely and completely

covered her body), which to me would indicate that she would be more apt to follow and

support cultural norms. Because of my own viewpoint, I found myself questioning my

own beliefs about the connection of dress, career, and religion, in regard to her decision

to be a pilot. Being a female pilot is not considered *haram*, but it is not considered an

appropriate career for a Saudi woman. Because of this, I found it interesting to see how

she was aware of the patriarchal influence in our country. However, until now, there are

still no commercial pilots who are Saudi women. There are only five female licensed

pilots in Saudi Arabia as of 2018. Even when things are not *haram*, opportunities for women in Saudi Arabia are very limited.

While all the participants' decisions were all based in cultural expectations of them as women, they found ways to find their own paths within the parameters of Saudi culture. Some of them chose to work within the systems available to them while others tried to forge their own path regardless of Saudi cultural norms. The quotes above provide examples of the overt ways that they unmasked power. Although they chose careers that were socially acceptable and found ways to work within Saudi career parameters for women, they articulated an understanding of the power that created these norms and a recognition that they were unjust.

Overcoming Alienation

When people overcome alienation, it entails finding freedom and "free agency where they feel they possess the desire, capacity, and resources to shape the world according to their desires" (Brookfield, 2005, p. 53). For my participants, stories of overcoming alienation came through in the ways that they felt like they could choose their own path in life. This was most apparent for Amal and Lucky because of their more assertive personalities, but throughout their interviews, the other participants also demonstrated ways they overcame alienation.

In her interview, Amal was very aware of the fact that she strives to do things that culturally men are allowed to do, and women are not and attributed this to her analysis of patriarchy. A unique factor for Amal, distinct from other participants, is that she was raised in a matriarchal household. She stated that "sometimes there are things that happen

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because of patriarchy, which gives you two choices: either face it by rebelling or try to find a democratic solution." She continued by stating that she used to try to find a way to be democratic but has been learning to be more direct. From a Saudi context, her mannerisms and behaviors of directness and confidence would be seen as traditionally masculine.

In contrast, Sara's way of communicating is more traditionally feminine for a Saudi woman. It is considered feminine for a woman to speak softly and passively to communicate her needs or desires, which is in direct conflict with US American ways of communicating for women. She states, "the problem is I should be convinced before you detect anything on me. However, people think I'm a bully [when I say no to something], they try to shush me." Her study abroad experience completely affected her way of expressing herself, particularly in regard to sexism. She has a strong point of view that she expresses more fully. She wants to have her mind respected and to be negotiated with in situations. Her identity has been shaped by the way she learned to develop free agency through her international student journey.

In regard to her career choice, Lucky did not have to overcome alienation because her career choice was already socially acceptable. Lucky stated that she has always picked the direct path when she encountered alienation. Her family has always supported and empowered her to be her own person and she stated that her family would have supported her regardless of her career choice. As the eldest child in her family, her parents had always given her free agency and autonomy in order to give her the best possible life. Interestingly, she does not cite her family as the reason for her

empowerment though. She stated that she always was a natural leader, which impacted the way she spent her time studying in the United States.

For these three participants, overcoming alienation was not always easy depending on their familial circumstances and personality traits, but it was mentioned in different ways for each woman. Despite this being mentioned repeatedly, none of my participants provided specific examples of alienating circumstances that they experienced. Not surprisingly, overcoming alienation thus directly tied into learning liberation for my participants, the fifth task of TLT.

Learning Liberation

The Oxford Dictionary (2018) defines liberation as "The action of setting someone free from imprisonment, slavery, or oppression; release…Freedom from limits on thought or behaviour." This definition of liberation is important to keep in mind as learning liberation was common throughout the second and third interviews for many of my participants; this may be partially due to the fact that the second interview focuses on present lived experience in regard to the research topic and the third reflects on the personal meaning of the topic.

In my memos, I found that these interviews were all about how they made conscious choices. Learning liberation was about making conscious choices about their rights and their lives, about understanding their gender and how societal expectations of them as women impacted them. It was also about realizing that there is not one right way of being or doing, and there are multiple truths and viewpoints in the world.

Nesma, Lucky, Honey, Sara, and Huda all reported in their second and third interviews that the things they gained from their experience studying abroad included having more voice, more independence, and more strength of personality (although they all stressed that this was not rebellious). They also stated that this allowed them to be intellectually liberal as well as defend their own rights.

In her interview, Sara said:

> The things I gained from my journey studying abroad is that I felt more empowered and my personality became more developed, stronger, and I started to fight for my rights. Not rebelling, just knowing my rights. Those were the things I really gained [from having to give up her dream career of being a doctor] …. Now I've been changed. I know what's mine, what's my right, and I'm going to fight for it.

It appears to me that Sara still struggles with these experiences of longing to be a doctor, even though she has a solid career in chemistry. She still expresses longing for the career she wanted.

In addition, Salma also talked about her *hijab* as a way of feeling liberated. She stated that she felt like having the choice to wear *hijab* was a way to express her views and her choices and it was empowering to be able to demonstrate her personality this way. I found this interesting as a woman who chooses to not wear *hijab* in the United States due to fear of being threatened. This was echoed by other participants who wear *hijab*, as they described wearing *hijab* as a way to combat the ways that women are objectified as well as a way to identify themselves as Muslim.

Most notable in this theme is the fact that all my participants felt the need to defend Saudi cultural norms in regard to this process, which prompted me as the

interviewer to assure them that I was not attacking our country or our customs. For instance, when Nesma began her undergraduate studies, she did not wear *hijab* but decided to start wearing *hijab* in graduate school after 9/11 as a way to embrace her identity as a proud Muslim woman. It was a way for her to push back against the US media's assertion that Muslim women are oppressed. I felt the need to demonstrate that I understand that sexism and patriarchy are a worldwide phenomenon, and that I was not trying to divorce myself from our shared cultural and national heritage. This reinforces that learning liberation is not a singular stopping point in transformative learning theory and is something that needs to be revisited as beliefs and worldviews are challenged. In this way, learning liberation for these women also blurred with how they reclaimed reason, the sixth task of TLT.

Reclaiming Reason

The task of reclaiming reason focuses on critically reflecting on cultural concepts, for example capitalism, education, and beauty norms. "A major concern of critical theory is to reclaim reason as something to be applied in all spheres of life" (Brookfield, 2005, p. 56). As can be seen in the previous theme of learning liberation, this is not something that is "one and done" in ones' educational journey and is something that needs to be revisited at various points. Sara, Amal, and Nesma all stated that their experience studying in the U.S. allowed them the opportunity to figure out the differences between religious-based patriarchy and culture-based patriarchy. They reported that they found themselves questioning the gender-based segregation in Saudi Arabia and the impact that this had on their lives in the past and what it could mean for them in the future, especially

after their study abroad experiences. They found an internal barometer of reason that did not depend on culture or religiously imposed ways of interpreting the world around them.

Nesma continues this thought by saying:

> The Saudi female woman puts herself in a box and she claims this theory that "women don't do this; women don't do that." They believe that they are better because they are being served [by men]. In reality, they are handicapped because you aren't allowed to make these decisions for yourself.

She recognizes that this narrative of Saudi women being "served and cared for" by the men is false and results in many women feeling stifled in many areas of their lives. In addition, she found that sexism essentially disables women because of the restrictions (e.g., until recently, women were not legally allowed to drive) that are placed simply because of one's gender.

My participants reclaimed reason in a variety of ways in regard to gender and sexism, many times leading to the "rational discourse" that Brookfield (2005) discusses in his seventh TLT task of practicing democracy.

Practicing Democracy

The final task of practicing democracy is about learning "to explore and respond to 'otherness'" (Brookfield, 2005, p. 65) and coping with multiple viewpoints and realities that people encounter in their lives. Especially in their last interviews, my participants demonstrated that democracy has become part of their worldview, particularly in regard to how they speak about themselves and speak up about the world around them. Additionally, the democracy they deployed in Saudi Arabia was about how to use rational discourse, something usually considered to be a male way of

communicating. Their educational journey brought them to an understanding that there is not a singular truth that applies to all people, even when they share similar identities and ideologies.

Two participants, Huda and Sara, spoke to this theme in particular. Sara stated that she doesn't "need to be mad or screaming" to state that she has rights as a woman. This view that women are loud and "overemotional" is common in Saudi notions of gendered communication. She added that she realizes that Saudi culture is complicated by gender segregation, there are still ways that she can claim space within the culture and reinforce her rights as a person. She understands that there is a mindfulness to how she can practice democracy in a culture that complicates women's lives on the primary basis of gender.

Sara and Huda both reinforced this notion of being able to support one's right to exist as she chooses without needing to be rebellious. Huda stated, "I'm well educated and well-shaped as a woman to understand that I don't need to enforce my rights. I'm going to practice them, it's as simple as that." She didn't feel she needed to name her rights but rather act on them. Lucky, who was raised in a home that encouraged democratic dialogues, said, "I am lucky that I learned how to practice democracy within my household before going into the workforce and life around me." She'd been learning how to use rational discourse from an early age at home.

This reinforcement of rational discourse as a means to practicing democracy was very gendered by Saudi standards. Much like in my own experience, my participants found that traditionally feminine ways of expressing discontent in Saudi culture were shut

down and they felt like they were forced to conform to perceived masculine ways of being in order to get their needs met. This is due to the perception that rational discourse is masculine and that women must be passive. They stated that they were able to express themselves without resorting to anger and shouting find their rights beyond anger and were able to recognize that they found themselves to be ambassadors of Saudi culture, a theme that permeates their stories of race in the United States.

Conclusion

My participants' descriptions of their experiences studying in the United States as Saudi international students was influenced by their experiences as women. This was highlighted in this chapter utilizing transformative learning theory as a framework to make meaning of their interviews. While educational opportunities were the driver for their desire to study in the United States, other factors influenced their journeys throughout the process, whether from pondering and ultimately choosing their career trajectory, dealing with scholarship regulations from the government, the familial tensions inherent in their career and educational choices (including the government requirement to have a male escort), and various interactions with cultural institutions. For all my participants, gender was the primary lens through which they described their educational journey, but it was not the only one that impacted their experiences. While many of them chose to wear *hijab* (*n*=6), conforming to Muslim ways of being were not the only ways that they were marked as non-white others while in the United States. Continuing to use Brookfield's (2005) transformative learning theory as a theoretical

framework, in the next chapter I describe how my participants viewed their experiences

related to race and racism.

CHAPTER V

STORIES OF RACE

This chapter focuses on the topics of race and racism. The influence of the 9/11 attacks in the U.S., and the substantial involvement of Saudi Arabia, has an inescapable influence on this discussion of Saudi international students. This turning point changed the average American's view of Saudi people into one of a dangerous non-white, terrorist, Other. This impacted most participants' experiences (all of them except Salma) of studying in the United States, making them always leery and anticipating racist behavior and comments from their U.S. American classmates. Most of my participants only talked about race after coming to the United States because they were able to identify and label it.

Although only one interviewee (Salma) was in the United States before 9/11, the impact of this moment in U.S. history is woven throughout all of the interviews. Xenophobia and Islamophobia became intertwined with perceptions of race for many Saudis studying in the United States. I begin this section with Salma's experiences pre-9/11 to set the historical stage for how Saudi students were viewed before this moment in history. Afterward, I show how the other seven women viewed their experiences related to race/ethnicity and racism in the US.

When Salma studied in the US from 1995 to 1999, she started out her experience

being shy and unsure of her language proficiency. Despite this, she found classmates that

were willing to help and made her feel included and welcomed. She found friends who

were always willing to help, which allowed her to overcome her shyness (especially

regarding her English language proficiency), become more confident and independent,

and express her views, all of which contributed to her becoming "a stronger woman."

Although she came to the US with her two children but without her husband for a while,

she stated that she felt safe and welcomed, which allowed her to develop lifelong

friendships with people that she is still in contact with currently. She notably formed a

close bond with a white U.S. American instructor in her department, a strong friendship

that included play dates with their children. This positive experience gave her the tools to

analyze the differences in power between the US and Saudi Arabia as well as interrogate

her connection to Islam (particularly regarding accepting other people). In her interview,

she reinforced her belief that taking initiative in one's own self-development as an

international student is important and that this led to her confidence-building as an

educator. Ultimately, she found the experience to be a great experience, emotionally,

socially, and educationally.

In contrast, the lived experiences of my other participants were very different. For

example, three participants (Honey, Huda and Lucky) experienced direct issues regarding

their ethnicity on campus. For example, Huda was in a class that required group work and

none of her classmates wanted to be in a group with her. When the professor asked one of

the students to include her in her group, the student replied "no, I don't want an Arabic

woman in my group." Huda interpreted this to mean that her Arabic-ness made her less of a person, and she felt frustrated. She said, "I was shocked about how they were viewing me." She continued, "I am not dumb, I can participate." She cried in class and despite the professor's intervention, still didn't get in a group. The professor told her to not worry about it and that she could work by herself. She ended up being the only person who presented without a group.

Honey's experience of racism was with an educator, albeit not one of her own professors. She was visiting a friend in a chemistry lab that had an aging microwave. One of the students left a book on top of the microwave, eventually causing smoke from the book being heated up repeatedly. Honey smelled it burning, warned the people in the room, and the fire alarm was triggered. They evacuated the lab and called the professor in charge of the space. The professor commented, "'Ooh there was a Saudi lady in the lab when it happened" and he started laughing as if it was a joke. She said that not only was the comment embarrassing, but it led to students looking at her accusingly. As a result, she flipped and said:

> "Don't say that! Why did you say that to me? I acknowledged the fire!" I didn't cry at that moment because I was focused on defending myself. I cried afterward, crying myself to bed, remembering how the students and teacher looked at me, because of how the notion of terrorism was embodied in me just because I am wearing *hijab*.

When she recounted this experience, she teared up and said that every time she thinks about it makes her upset. It was clear to me that this incident was traumatic for her.

Lucky's experience was different as it related to language. Lucky said to me with a very sad face that she once had a very bad grade because of her colleagues. She said,

> In one of my final presentations, one of my Arabic Saudi female colleagues' turns was before me and when she stood in front of the class to present, all of my American "friends" started laughing and making faces and leaning forward in an attempt to show that they were not understanding and/or listening well to the presentation. At that time, I was looking at them with a total fear that possessed me, and I pictured myself in her shoes and how I would feel, and yes I had that same reaction and even worse, I forgot what to say and how to act. For one, I felt that I forgot all of my English and I am lesser person than them. I took a low grade in that presentation, and it feels bad just because I was scared from the reaction.

Lucky's story is common knowledge to me as an international student because I have heard similar stories and know that, for many of my friends, their biggest fear was to be laughed at because of their English language capabilities. Despite personally knowing of such stories, it hurt to hear that insensitivity towards others can lead to educational failure; the only reason that she did not get a better grade was because of the peer pressure and feeling like a lesser person because of her accent.

Honey, Huda, and Lucky had specific instances of racism, which they themselves named as racist, that contributed to their experiences. Although Sara, Noha, and Nesma only reported hearing stories of such things, they were always extremely careful of their behavior, words, and interactions because they were fearful of experiencing racism directly. In addition, all eight of the participants stated that they noticed the ways that people looked at them in negative ways, which caused them to worry that the situation was going to escalate into something more direct. These stories passed through their communities and resulted in various ways they attempted to mitigate exposure to these

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negative interactions. These stories even influenced the universities they chose to attend, the neighborhoods they lived in, and the ways they chose to interact with their U.S. classmates. These were stories they lived day after day, anticipating and living in fear, and expecting it to happen to them. All the participants who did not experience racism first hand said, "thanks to God it did not happen to me." This showed me that they were expecting to be assaulted and harassed. It felt that they were thankful that it did not happen to them.

All my participants lived by four main rules: 1) Never go out late (stated by Sara and Amal), 2) Limit connections with other people (namely non-Saudis) (stated by all my participants), 3) Gather around other Saudis to feel safe (stated by my married participants—Nesma, Sara, Amal, and Honey—to make sure that their kids were safe from harm), and 4) Act as agents or ambassadors of Saudi culture (as stated by all my participants). For example, despite Sara's acceptance to multiple universities, she ultimately chose her university after discussing rates of hate crimes with a police officer to determine the safest option. For Nesma, she said that she deliberately surrounded herself with other Arabic people when she began wearing *hijab*, especially after 9/11, because she wanted to make sure that she and her family were safe. They all sought ways to make sure that their temporary communities in the United States guaranteed them a way to find community and safety.

I analyzed participants' experiences of race and racism through Brookfield's (2005) framework. This framework allows the experiences of recognizing race and

racism to come to the surface for these interviewing international Saudi women students who studied in the U.S.

Challenging Ideologies

As stated in the previous chapter, challenging an ideology requires that one is able to identify the ideology and the ways that it impacts their lives (although many people may not consciously recognize this at the time). For my participants, social media was the primary way that they were able to identify and challenge ideologies related to racism.

Amal, Salma, Sara, Lucky, and Noha all discussed the media and its effect on how US Americans view Saudi women as lacking agency (using *hijab* as the physical way that this lack of agency is exemplified). They used various forms of media as a means to educate people to show that the way the media at large tries to state that Saudi women are oppressed is misplaced and Sara notes that this is "because of *hijab* and the way they look and act are misconceptions." Sara goes on to state that wearing *hijab* was based on her own thoughtful decision, something that she made reinforced by making direct eye contact with me in the interview and restating in several ways.

Much like Sara, Nesma's body language when talking about her decision to wear *hijab* was also assertive with direct eye contact. In her second interview, she stated that she decided to wear *hijab* after four years of living in the U.S. In her first year in her master's program, she said "I chose to wear *hijab* and I always make sure that everyone knows that is was my choice and not forced on me." Her voice was affirmative, and it felt like she meant that wearing the *hijab* is not the oppressive image of Muslim women that many U.S. American perceive. The way that she and Sara deployed this task was to

acknowledge the meaning of *hijab* in both cultures (in Saudi Arabia, *hijab* is solely a means of covering the hair for Muslim women, and in the United States, U.S. Americans may view the *hijab* is an indication of Islamic-based oppression and also tie it to people who are viewed as terrorists) and be able to articulate their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors related to it.

On the other hand, Lucky and Noha do not wear *hijab* and insisted that they do have the choice to not wear it. For them, they feel as though their choice to not wear *hijab* allows them to show their American classmates that they truly do have the right to wear what they choose to wear. Lucky said, "I eventually will wear *hijab* because I believe it is embedded in my religion, but I will wear it when I am fully committed to it." Noha said the exact same thing when it comes to believing in *hijab* as a symbol of religion but added "not wearing *hijab* now makes my life easy." The phrase "makes my life easy" stopped me and I asked her "what do you mean by easy?" she replied back "I don't get judged, you know what I mean." Essentially, not wearing *hijab* allows her to have the chance of passing as part of the dominant culture instead of being automatically labeled as an outsider. This is something that I have experienced as well, as choosing to not wear *hijab* while in the US has allowed me to be seen as less of a threat. In other words, by not wearing *hijab* I am seen as an ambiguously brown woman of color. Sometimes this makes my life easier because, for us as Saudi Muslim women, being viewed as terrorists or part of terrorism is worse than being viewed as women of color. My views were echoed by Noha because we both found that not wearing *hijab* was a safer choice while

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in the United States, essentially stating that not wearing *hijab* is more about not being attacked rather than the garment itself.

For my participants, challenging ideology in terms of race was primarily about interrogating the choice to wear *hijab* while studying in the United States. This is a clear intersection of racism and sexism, in that my participants analyzed their decision to wear or not to wear *hijab*. This was due to a mixture of perceptions that many U.S. Americans hold about women who wear *hijab* as well as their own relationship to being marked as a visibly different person than the communities they lived and studied in while in the United States.

Contesting Hegemony

Much like with the first task, people need to be able to recognize hegemony to be able to contest it in their lives. This task is a more active and external process than challenging ideologies. This pushing back against embedded behaviors was demonstrated by several participants in seemingly mundane ways. For example, when encountering strangers, while Amal said that she would "only smile and nod just to show them that I am friendly," Noha, Sara, and Nesma all deliberately initiated small talk with White U.S. American strangers due to their personal perceptions of themselves as ambassadors. Sara stated that she "started to initiate conversation and small talk. Some people would eventually warm up to me and say 'Good Morning' or smile." Similarly, Noha said "I do approach people with a smile and talk to show people that our religion is good and has good things and that we are living happy in Saudi Arabia."

In contrast, Salma did not feel like she needed to be an ambassador of her culture, but this was likely a function of her pre-9/11 context. She described how her neighborhood greeted her when she moved in, gave her gifts of cookies, invited her to Sunday cookouts, and checked on her frequently. She never felt like she needed to defend herself or her reasons for being here, even as a darker skinned *hijab*-wearing woman. This was a starkly different story than the other women I interviewed.

This ambassadorial behavior that many of my participants describe demonstrates that it is very difficult for my participants to push back against structures. For them to feel that they have power, they would need to be seen and recognized as people. Because of this, my participants chose to exercise the power that they did hold in these situations, which was by choosing to interact with U.S. American strangers in friendly ways. They tried to push back in the ways that they felt competent in, using friendliness as a way to contest the dominant way of being. In Islam, starting the *Salam* is an Islamic-friendly exchange that carries a lot of religious meaning. In Islam, initiating the *Salam* means, "I come in peace." Therefore, my participants do that as an act of contesting hegemony and showing that Islam is not a religion of terror.

Unmasking Power

Brookfield (2005) states that unmasking power is about "how adults learn to decide when power is being exercised responsibly and how they learn to defend themselves against its unjust and arbitrary use" (p. 49). Much like in the previous task, this was very difficult for my participants in regard to race as they largely felt powerless. Aside from the ways that they interacted in small ways (for instance, the participants who

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chose to be friendly in day-to-day interactions with strangers), it was obvious in the interviews that many of these race-based stories made them uncomfortable to recount.

Sara discussed an interaction with an Indian professor at her university in the US. The professor would look at her with disgust. She stated that "at first I would avoid eye contact with him and avoid facing him. But by the time I felt that it would not bother me, I started to not change my behavior, look him in the eye, and I don't address him or acknowledge him." She recognized that this was her way of subverting this power dynamic with him.

Amal's way of handling microaggressions at work with a specific colleague resulted in her deciding to make it her personal mission to have this person interact with her. When she told me the story, she seemed exasperated that every attempt she made to say "Good morning" or "hello" was met with the colleague ignoring her.

Similar to the second task of challenging ideology, this task was much harder to identify in my participants' interviews. My participants felt as though they were powerless in many situations, which made them have issues with trying to unmask it in their lives.

Overcoming Alienation

The fourth task of overcoming alienation is about finding freedom and "free agency where they feel they possess the desire, capacity, and resources to shape the world according to their desires" (Brookfield, 2005, p. 53). For my participants, this was where many of them decided to take on the role of an ambassador of Saudi culture in order to combat feelings of loneliness and alienation. Specifically, Honey, Amal, Huda, Nesma,

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and Salma all mentioned how they sought out ways to find and build community, which all notably revolved around food.

Huda's way of finding community was by attending all of the brown bag lunch talk events that she could. Although she was aware that people were expected to bring their own lunches, she decided to bring food for other attendees of the events in order to develop relationships with others.

For Amal, she always brought food to her son's soccer games. She got excited talking about how she contributed to her child's community in this way. She went out of her way to tell me that this was her tangible way of showing others that she is a productive and contributing member of their community.

Nesma spoke at length about finding social networks. She spent a lot of time, especially in school. In regard to her friendships, "I like to cook for them, show them [her female American friends] how we [Saudis] live on a daily basis, and so they can see me without *hijab*." By forming these social connections, she found ways to not only be an everyday ambassador of Saudi culture but also as a way to feel like a part of a greater student culture at her university.

Salma's story was a bit different, although she also used food to find community. When her husband needed to go back to Saudi Arabia, she was left living alone without a male escort for the first time in her life. At first, she felt daunted, especially because her children were staying with her. She found herself comparing the social context in Saudi Arabia to the one in the United States, which gave her a lot of anxiety. Ultimately, she found freedom, power, and community in this. She bonded with her neighbors whom

babysat her children, she drove herself to her various errands, and found the experience empowering. She told me that it showed her that she was capable of living by herself, taking care of her kids, and having a meaningful school experience.

Many participants told me stories of sharing food with their communities as a means to overcome alienation as international students in the United States. Not only did they find this to be a tangible way to break the ice with other people (whether through a soccer game or through a brown bag lecture), but also a way of demonstrating tangible value to other people. Through this behavior, they were able to push back against preconceived notions of Saudi women.

Learning Liberation

The definition I used in the previous chapter for liberation from The Oxford Dictionary (2018) – "The action of setting someone free from imprisonment, slavery, or oppression; release…Freedom from limits on thought or behaviour" – is important to keep in mind with this task's connection to race and racism for my participants. As with the previous chapter, learning liberation was common throughout the second and third interviews for many participants. This theme primarily was found in discussions of whether or not a participant chose to wear *hijab* while studying in the United States and what her relationship to *hijab* was.

This was most poignant for the participants who choose to wear *hijab* (*n*=6, Huda, Sara, Nesma, Amal, Salma, and Honey) because of the various meanings that are ascribed to it, both by the wearers and members of Saudi culture at large, and the intersection with US American cultural perceptions. For example, Sara stated,

Because of *hijab* and because I'm a Muslim woman, most of my friends have questions in their minds. However, they never approach me until they become much closer and one of the main questions is that "you aren't allowed to talk to any man?"

She further mentions that "it is funny that people think *hijab* is oppressive. In my opinion, I think it's liberating just because it explains, my identity [as a Muslim] is on my head, it has nothing to do with me being oppressed."

Salma's story of wearing *hijab* in the United States was similar to the other participants, despite her pre-9/11 context. She had been approached by her professor. The professor told her, ""'You are in America, why do you need to wear *hijab*? Act like an American. You look fine without it.' I told her 'it's Islam, I choose to wear it. It's not being imposed on me.'"

Both Huda and Nesma told me about their experiences with startling female American classmates by taking off their *hijab* in the women's bathroom on campus. As they both have long hair, women would make comments about being surprised that they had hair (assuming that they were bald). Both of them were visibly unhappy when they told me these stories because they felt like their classmates were making assumptions about their worth or their health. In a similar vein, Honey had people tell her that she was too pretty to keep her hair covered. Huda, Nesma, and Honey all stated that they replied to these commenters that their *hijab* was their life choice (to combat erroneous preconceived perceptions and to cope with their frustrations over the situation). They commented that this was their way to push back against the assumption that Muslims are terrorists and that Muslim women are oppressed. Ultimately, they were frustrated by the

ways people felt the need to comment on their bodies because they did not look "normal" for the typical American college student.

It is not surprising that *hijab* was a primary point of discussion related to learning liberation, particularly as studying in the US made many of these women analyze their decisions for wearing *hijab* and ultimately their relationship to it. These stories, as well as Salma's pre-9/11 stories, and my experiences, bring to light how many U.S. Americans view *hijab* as a marker of oppression for Muslim women. Yet, for the women themselves, they viewed wearing *hijab* as a way to stay physically connected to their religious beliefs and culture. This analysis is a fundamental component of the next task of reclaiming reason.

Reclaiming Reason

Brookfield's (2005) sixth task of reclaiming reason focuses on critically reflecting on cultural concepts; it is important because "A major concern of critical theory is to reclaim reason as something to be applied in all spheres of life" (p. 56). Similar to the previous theme of learning liberation, this requires frequent revisiting and renegotiating of ones' educational journey, especially for a group of students that may never have encountered racism in their home country.

Noha told of a story where she decided to not act during a situation in the moment due to fear but has been able to reflect on this situation for the future. She was at the store where she witnessed a guy screaming and treating a lady wearing *hijab* badly specifically because of her *hijab*. She does not wear *hijab*, and she didn't speak up. She explained,

> Even worse, I didn't even talk to the woman in my native language because I didn't want him to know that I spoke Arabic. It hurts me deep inside, but I reasoned it because of fear of being put in the same situation or even worse. I think me not wearing *hijab* in such a situation might help me not face these kinds of racist interactions.

This was the first time she witnessed a negative situation based on race that was related to her own life experience. In her interview, she expressed remorse that she did not do anything at the time to assist the person and that she was essentially being a bad ally to *hijab*-wearing women.

Amal said that she did encounter racist behavior from her colleagues, mainly focusing on her limited language proficiency. She said,

> In one of my group work assignments, my colleagues always picked the place and times to meet and never consulted me, it is only "we are meeting this time and please be ready," in a rude way. And every time I show up they make me feel unwelcomed, but I tried as much as I could to not make it affect me, and I made it my challenge to always show up and participate whether they liked my comments or not, which they rarely did.

When she described this situation, her face fell, and she looked utterly defeated. She added that it hurt because this study abroad experience should have been a journey of a lifetime as well as something to cherish but remembering what happened made her heart ache. It created a lot of stress in her life that has now sullied many of her memories of her educational journey in the United States. Issues like this create a global impact in a person's life, regardless of whether or not the situation happened on campus or in the classroom. This incident affirmed the fears she already held about the experience.

Similar to Amal's challenges, Huda also dealt with alienation from peers, and it impacted her grades. In her third interview, she described the long-term impact of the classmates that went to their professor and told her that they did not want to work with her. While recounting this situation, she was visibly angry while reflecting on this because she felt that doing her presentation alone was letting her bigoted classmates win.

> I hate sometimes going to one of my classes because I feel the tension every time I enter the room, but I did not want to say or do anything because I do not want to act like crazy and people would say that it is only in your mind and there is no such thing that they are not welcoming me and to be honest this made me hate the class, and I took B in it.

Due to feeling tension from her peers, Huda felt less motivated to be an active participant in the class. She felt isolated and knew that she was not welcomed among her classmates. This led to her academic setback (i.e., a grade of B in the course).

Hearing her story made me realize that feeling like less of a human because of being perceived as different was a common theme among the women. These experiences led to them feeling unwelcome, both on campus as well as in the country as a whole. They felt as though they were stuck between a rock and a hard place, always needing to interrogate their own behavior and the behavior of people around them, not knowing whether or not someone not saying "good morning" was a matter of the other person not hearing or whether or not it was deliberately rude. While Brookfield's intent with these tasks is positive and hopeful, my participants' constant need to reason through people's behaviors and words ultimately created many difficulties in their international student

journey in the US. This ties in well with the last of Brookfield's tasks, practicing

democracy.

Practicing Democracy

Practicing democracy is about learning "to explore and respond to 'otherness'"

(Brookfield, 2005, p. 65) and coping with multiple viewpoints and realities that people

encounter in their lives. Much like in the sixth task, this is something that is revisited and

repeatedly analyzed in a group that has a completely different cultural reference to race in

their home country than to their host country. Similarly, to the chapter on gender and

sexism, my participants spent a significant amount of time in their last interview

demonstrating that democracy has become part of their everyday consciousness. This was

another theme where ambassadorial behavior was mentioned in order to deal with racism,

xenophobia, and Islamophobia while in the United States.

Six participants (Nesma, Amal, Huda, Honey, Sara, and Salma) all described

being ambassadors for Saudi culture by censoring their words, minding their behaviors,

and making sure that they presented themselves in the best way possible. For instance,

Sara remembered her behavior by the feedback she received from her neighbors. She

said:

> The most empowering things I received from my neighbors that resonates is [they said to me] "you gave a beautiful picture about your culture, your Islam, and the middle east." When I got back, I'm so glad that I did what I did and acted this way, I'm glad I represent myself and my Islam.

Her story resonated with my own experience as it is incredibly stressful to feel the need

to constantly defend one's culture, religion, and choices in this manner and can

negatively impact the international student experience. Understanding how the politics of negotiating in the US versus in Saudi Arabia, they used American rational discourse in their behavior and speech. In order to demonstrate the experience of Saudi women, they learned how to use American discourse to show the diversity of viewpoints.

Amal's behavior has received similar praise from US Americans, but in her case in regard to interactions with fellow parents.

> The parents at my son's school reactions to me as a Muslim female wearing *hijab* was pretty empowering because every time I talk in the PTA meeting they look at me like "wow, this woman is smart" and that makes me work harder to present myself in a better image that makes me focus on my image and my mind rather than anything else.

Amal practiced democracy through her involvement in the PTA and this assisted her sense of self-worth and increased the respect she garnered from others.

Nesma, Huda, Lucky, and Noha's understanding of race was impacted by the stories they've heard. They never had people directly comment on their behavior, although they all state how they are constantly aware of how their behaviors may be read by people in their daily interactions. They stated that they tailored their behavior in ways that would increase their chances of being accepted and mitigating fear.

Examining the participants responses through this lens of practicing democracy show the contradictions inherent in participants' ways of coping. They realized that their behavior as ambassadors was a way to survive and succeed as students, but did not allow them to be their whole, authentic selves. While Brookfield's seventh task describes a

positive and hopeful feeling, my participants expressed more of the contradictions and difficulties in navigating their time as an international student.

Conclusion

While Brookfield's tasks were useful for analyzing my participants' experiences of being international women studying in the United States, this framework was less elucidating regarding their experiences on race and racism. For Salma, this was likely because she was here before 9/11 and the political climate in the United States was starkly different than for all other participants. For the rest of my participants, this may be because most of them tried to avoid interacting with Americans as much as they could due to their presumption and fear from facing any racial threat, which ultimately caused fear and fleeing the country and jeopardized their scholarship. At some point, all my participants expressed the belief that they are here for a very short time and prefer to avoid interactions rather than encounter racist situations.

Regarding how they were seen by their U.S. American communities as a whole, they felt tension to assimilate, whether or not they wanted to. They also felt that their international status meant that they would never be able to assimilate, even if they wanted to. They lived in a difficult interstitial space that particularly made interactions with white Americans stressful due to overt racism as well as racist microaggressions. Unfortunately, they spoke of their struggles much more than their joys with me, something that colors my analysis. This may have occurred because my interviews were conducted in Saudi Arabia and they felt safer to talk about the traumas, especially as struggles are sometimes more easily recalled from a distance.

Furthermore, stories that circulate in the Saudi international student community of and about race generate the desire to stay sheltered and amongst themselves, essentially isolating themselves from their larger, non-Saudi communities. However, the fear that follows them every moment and every day when they step out of their homes is intolerable. They are always on the watch and waiting for any racial incident, particularly for the female students that chose to wear *hijab*. Their struggle and fear are real, tangible, and palpable.

This and the previous chapter together present the findings of my data analysis. The next chapter will discuss my findings in relation to existing literature as well as outline the strengths and limitations of my study, the potential implications for professionals working with international students (specifically Saudi women students), as well as my suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION

My own experiences as a Saudi International woman and student left me longing

for an understanding of who I was and where my place was in the experience of studying

abroad. I have spent nine years studying in the United States, and throughout these years,

I have questioned my identity numerous times, especially with regard to being a woman

and international student of color. Even though I do not wear the traditional Islamic attire,

including *hijab*, my fear of someone's attitude changing towards me once they realize I

am Muslim has never quite disappeared during my time here. To me, I am wearing

hijab—this cultural marker of female Muslim identity—symbolically; in other words, it

is there, even though it is not visible to anyone else. Beyond this, my desire to learn about

the educational experiences of other interviewing international Saudi women students

brought me to this work in hopes of finding ways to eradicate the educational, social, and

cultural challenges related to them being women. They find ways to face the racism,

sexism, and oppression that they are subjected to without any prior knowledge of how to

cope with it.

Chapter VI focuses on the final meanings associated with the challenges these

women overcame in order to pursue their education. In Chapter II the research provided a

foundation for understanding Islamophobia, international students' and their experiences,

discrimination, identity, and acculturation. To conduct this study, an in-depth interview technique was employed to illustrate the lived experiences of eight female Saudi international students. This research used Brookfield's (2005) seven tasks of the transformative learning theory (TLT) to derive meaning from interviewing international Saudi women students' experiences of studying in the United States as well as the theory of critical race feminism as lens through which to interpret and make meaning of their stories. A set of three in-depth, semi-structured, qualitative interviews based in phenomenology was conducted with eight Saudi women currently residing in Saudi Arabia. These women had completed an undergraduate or graduate degree from a university in the southeast region of the United States and had lived there for at least two years.

Research Questions

This project sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of Saudi international women studying in U.S. colleges and universities?

    a. What social, cultural, and academic challenges have they faced?

    b. What do they perceive as positive social, cultural, and academic experiences?

2. How do the educational experiences and knowledge gained from being an international student in the United States influence how they view themselves?

I used critical race feminism (CRF) and transformative learning theory (TLT) to guide and inform the coding, analysis, and discussion of this research. I chose these

theories to serve as the theoretical framework because they align with my own

epistemology and research paradigm, both of which have been influenced by my

education and personal experiences. There were more than 23 hours of interview audio.

The women shared rich stories about a wide array of topics. Another researcher using the

same audio and research questions might come to different conclusions than I have,

depending on that person's subjectivity, experiences, and research paradigm. This means

that there are many interpretations, ways to analyze, and conclusions to draw from the

data. What I offer here are suggestions that I hope will contribute to the scholarly

conversation.

In this chapter, the results are discussed based on each research question as well

as Brookfield's seven tasks. After that, the usefulness of Brookfield's (2005) TLT is

critiqued regarding the participants of this study. Lastly, the limitations and implications

of this study are discussed, and it concludes with recommendations for future research.

Social, Cultural, and Academic Challenges and Positive Experiences

Initially I set out to discover more about Saudi students' social, cultural, and

academic challenges as well as their positive experiences. However, the stories

participants told revealed much more about the challenges than any positive outcomes. I

did not expect to find this, especially to the depth that of description that the participants

provided. Partially I think this occurred because this may have been one of only a few

opportunities for the participants to share these challenges. Additionally, based on my

own experiences, I have faced more challenges based on my gender and race in the

United States, than I have experienced positive moments. It has shaped how I approach

my interactions with people, especially strangers or those I am encountering for the first time.

Social, Cultural, and Academic Challenges

Many of the challenges the participants faced became evident when their interviews were analyzed using Brookfield's (2005) seven tasks as a framework. As described in the literature, some of the participants' experiences were challenging, where they faced anxieties in adjusting in a new country with a drastically different culture and language, different learning and studying environments, as well as different social and cultural norms (Kwon, 2009; Lobnibe, 2009; Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014; Nour, 2011; Shideh, 2006; Sultana & Smith, 2011; Tangen & Mercer, 2012). However, all the participants did experience transformative development in their identities where they felt independent and gained more power in their decisions. They felt as though they had a voice to speak for themselves and became more self-reliant.

Through all the participants' difficult experiences, several themes developed to answer the research questions. These themes are described in the following sections and are compiled from the lived experiences detailed during the three, in-depth interviews.

Theme 1: Striving to be ambassadors. The theme of ambassadorship was interwoven through some aspect of every participant's interviews. This is consistent with Hart's (2016) findings that "because of the media descriptions or reports about ISIS or other terrorist activities, Muslim students spend time educating Americans they meet for the first time about Islam and Muslim culture" (p. 114–115). This sentiment of needing to educate Americans is echoed throughout research with a variety of marginalized and

minority populations. For example, in Bettez's (2012) qualitative research with mixed-race women, she found that "many participants felt a calling and/or responsibility to be educators and build bridges about issues of oppression" (p. 196). This statement is consistent with what the participants described about the need to educate their American friends, professors, colleagues, and even strangers whom they encountered on daily basis.

Furthermore, Suleiman (1999) suggested that many Americans are unwilling to change a perception once that perception is created. Some participants were highly aware that their need to be ambassadors went beyond friendly education as they were privy to stories from friends, family, and colleagues who had experienced Islamophobic incidents. For example, some of these participants would go to the extent of cooking a meal for several people to show their kindness and generosity.

Theme 2: Experiencing isolation. Many of the participants reported either feeling isolated or that they deliberately isolated themselves from their American classmates and community members. This action aligns with Khan and Eklund (2012), who mention that Muslims feel socially isolated to avoid negative attitudes from the people around them. For example, Sara described how she selected her university based on a conversation she had with a police officer asking him which state had the fewest hate crimes. She did not select her university by her program's ranking but rather by the place where she would face the least amount of negative attention. Furthermore, Gu et al. (2009) stated that loneliness is a major challenge that international students encounter. Powerlessness, alienation, and a sense of not belonging were stated as reasons for some international students' feelings of loneliness and unhappiness with their social lives. The

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participants in this study did deliberately isolate themselves. All participants related their interactions with American students as limited, which itself could be an indication of social isolation. It is possible that participants did not intentionally seek social isolation from U.S. citizens, but rather that they created social bonds and support with other Muslim students. The findings from this study were also not different from the literature (Muedini, 2009) in that the negative attitudes emerged more from people in academic settings (rather than outside academia). Students described several negative encounters with educators and colleagues. It is possible that these negative encounters were so significant that they drove participants to avoid (hence isolate) unnecessary interactions. Another outcome of this avoidance with certain individuals was that participants did seek social bonds and support with other Muslims in their communities. Interestingly then, the decision to avoid or stay isolated from one group of people potentially allowed for a greater sense of community with another group of people: other interviewing international Saudi women students.

Much like in Hart's (2016) work, this isolation goes beyond feeling othered. Huda provides a powerful example of this where her academic experience and course grade were directly impacted by the sense of isolation; she took a B in a class because she was singled out for being an Arabic woman. She was allowed to do her group assignment alone because she was unable to find support through her professor. Situations where my participants felt alone and even abandoned by the systems designed to support them were common.

Theme 3: Wearing a *hijab* as a marker of pride in religion. Much like Hart's (2016) findings with her women participants, who wore the full traditional outfits, the participants in this study found that wearing a *hijab* while studying in the United States impacted their experiences (p. 117). For most of the participants in this study, wearing a *hijab* became a marker of their Muslim identities that showed others that they were not ambiguously brown people, but specifically brown, overtly Muslim women. Six out of eight participants wear *hijab*, and they had to educate their peers, professors, and people they met for the first time about Islam and Islamic clothing cultures, especially that *hijab* is a form of oppression instead of national, cultural, and traditional practice.

Furthermore, some participants' incidents regarding wearing a *hijab* reflect the same findings as in Young and Snead's (2017) study of interviewing international Saudi women student participants reported feeling that classmates responded negatively to the *hijab*, indicating by this visual cue that they were Muslims. They believed that this might have led their fellow classmates to discriminate against them. However, the participants in my study were describing their inner fear of discrimination, thus impacting their academic process.

Theme 4: Experiencing patriarchal constraints. Due to the differences in the way that patriarchy and sexism are deployed in the two cultural contexts (United States and Saudi Arabia), all the participants spoke to this in their interviews. However, none of the participants overtly described or blamed how their life choices were affected by the males in their families, such as their fathers, uncles, and spouses. As Doumato (2000)

explains, "Girls were taught enough to buy into an assigned role, a role in which they were subordinate to men but not enough to challenge it" (p. 93).

Ross (2003) in his research about the patriarchy in Saudi Arabia argued that the power of male figures was not only related to Islam but also was related to the geographical fact that oil was discovered in the Gulf area. This further barred women from entering the workforce as it was already male-dominated, with men gaining more power and influence over women. Similar to Ross' (2003) findings, all my participants had different initial professional aspirations (e.g., doctor, pilot) than the majors they selected, but they expressed that these dreams might negatively affect their chances to get married and have families of their own. Thus, most of these women compromised their dreams in accordance with what the male figures in their families proscribed.

Thus, in relation to the social, cultural, and academic challenges, four themes arose: (1) acting as ambassadors, (2), experiencing isolation, (3) *hijab* as a marker of identity, and (4) patriarchal constraints. These themes, derived from the participants stories throughout the interviews, directly impacted their experiences of being interviewing international Saudi women students. While there were some positive outcomes, such as developing community with like-minded women sharing in the same sense of isolation, for the most part, these themes reflect difficult social, cultural, and academic challenges.

Positive Social, Cultural, and Academic Experiences

Participants said very little about positive experiences in the collective sets of interviews, but there were some positives. Most of the participants expressed the sense of

empowerment gained through their challenges and their adjustments to different cultural environments. In the United States, they had to become more independent (e.g., traveling without a male escort, making family-related decisions without consulting men, and driving) through this, they learned about their capacity to empower themselves and be successful in an unknown environment. Also, through observations (of U.S. women) and learning what women can achieve in the culture they are living in, the participants discovered a sense of self.

Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern (2015) reported in their study that many of the Saudi women felt changed by their time studying in the United States; participants stated they had increased confidence, independence, intellectual growth, and acceptance of others as some of the results of their academic sojourn. Regardless of their challenges, whether or not they lived in the United States before or after 9/11, one positive outcome of their experiences was that my participants developed and practiced a sense of independence. Salma, for example, lived in the U.S prior to 9/11 and was able to identify the social contexts in both countries, which gave her a new perspective on life in Saudi Arabia.

Other participants who lived in the U.S. after 9/11 had a similar outcome. This experience altered their behavior and gave them the courage to challenge dominant Saudi norms and stand up for themselves. Furthermore, cultural adjustment in a new environment made my participants more independent, and they made sense of their experiences in ways that increased their strength and capability to control their lives and grow personally.

Another positive experience that the participants described was actually a result, or directly related to, a challenge that they faced. Essentially, the women came to know community through isolation. By being ostracized by certain groups of people (e.g., professors and other students), the women sought understanding from people who had gone through the same thing—other interviewing international Saudi women students. All of the participants described this in their interviews.

Changing Self-Perceptions

One of the goals of this research was to discover: How do the educational experiences and knowledge gained from being an international student in the United States influence how they view themselves? By utilizing Brookfield's (2005) transformative learning theory as a framework in conjunction with critical race feminism, I was able to identify some interesting findings in relation to this research question. In addition, the aim was to determine whether or not these women viewed their identity as shifted because of their international study experience.

Theme 1: Shifting Identities

Erichsen (2011) used transformative learning theory to analyze the ways that international women students were impacted by the process of studying abroad. She emphasized that research about international students must have a focus on the ways that identity is constantly shifting and being redefined. This was evident in my own research when my participants described pushing back against patriarchy, understanding their rights, and interrogating their understanding of themselves as people with power and agency. Furthermore, through their stories, their experiences of race and racism showed

how they defined and redefined their worldview (as shown through Brookfield's seven tasks), which ultimately impacted the ways they viewed their experiences of sexism and patriarchy, especially in Saudi Arabia because they now had U.S. experiences that countered their experiences at home.

As Sarup (1998) mentioned, identity can be understood as the story we tell about ourselves and the stories that others tell about us. My finding in this research showed that participants talked about how their identities shifted and changed through their sojourned experiences. For instance, Nesma and Sara both mentioned that they were initially people that would try to take the most diplomatic path in social situations, even if it ended up resulting in them not getting their needs met. They stated that they now assert themselves to get what they need in life, something that was evident in their demeanor and non-verbals in their interviews (e.g., their tone of voice was more assertive, Sara waived her finger emphatically to make her point). The three phases of interviews elucidated how these women's identities shifted and evolved because I was able to observe changes in their demeanor, notice shifts in their stories, and the time in between interviews encouraged self-reflection. The shifts that these women experienced are similar to what Anzaldua (2007) describes, "Knowing is painful because after 'it' happens I can't stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before" (p.70). Similarly, the study abroad experience created space for the women to change as a result of encountering different social, cultural, and academic situations, and they were no longer the same people they were before.

Additionally, Hsieh (2006b) discusses the role of social relations of power in international students' negotiation of their identity and especially the role of how social interactions within American society play into that development. This relates to how my participants learned to overcome their fear and isolation using their limited resources while in the United States. One way that my participants did this was by smiling at others and using the traditional Muslim greeting of *Salaam Aleikum* (a greeting that states that they come in peace). Aside from tradition, this also is the way that the speaker is obliged to act as an ambassador.

For many, studying at an American university is one of the first opportunities an international student has to confront and construct a vision of who they are beyond their understood cultural roles in their home environment (Ward, 2008). This was especially evident in my participants' lives in regard to their stories of gender, sexism, and analysis of patriarchy. They were able to analyze their experiences of sexism in Saudi Arabia with the tools and life experiences learned by studying in the United States. My participants reiterated that they were no longer the same person as they were before studying in the U.S. They found their voice, gained independence (not only financially, but throughout multiple aspects of their lives—decision-making, driving, moving around in different spaces), and were overall more knowledgeable about themselves and the world at large. As Erichsen (2011) found in her research, their identity development taught them "'how to be' a particular person within a particular context" (p. 21). As Sara stated, "now I've been changed. I know what's mine, what's my right, and I'm going to fight for it."

Theme 2: "Because I am a Girl" - Constraints Based on Gender

The theme "Because I am a girl" was very vibrant through my participants' interviews. Basically, all participants said that they learned that being a woman affected their lives and life choices. Transformative learning further elaborates the reflective learning process as "a structural reorganization in the way a person looks at himself and his relationships [sic]" (Mezirow, 1975, p. 162). While all the participants' decisions were based in cultural expectations of them as women, they found ways to create previously invisible paths within the parameters of Saudi culture. The power dynamic in Saudi Arabia is heavily influenced by sexism and patriarchy. While some of the sexism is based in Islam, much of it is derived from Saudi cultural norms (Alexander & Welzel, 2011). Some of the participants chose to work within the systems available to them while others tried to forge their own path regardless of Saudi cultural norms.

Although my participants focused on *hijab* in regard to race and racism, the fact that it is a garment worn specifically by women makes it also an inextricable part of some participants' experiences of gender in the United States. This aligns with Hart's (2016) research with Muslim international students in which she stated,

> Women were more affected than men because of traditional dress. Many Muslim women students expressed how on a day-to-day basis, there may be some confrontation from a professor or a person in the community about what that individual saw in the media. Again, participants were able to cope with the situation through prayer, friends, and family. (p. 115)

My participants similarly found ways to seek solace in communities with fellow women international students whom they also identified as friends. They did not speak as much about prayer and family.

Regarding gender, using Brookfield's seven tasks of TLT allowed me to adequately explore the lived experience of the participants because I could identify and analyze their pre- and post-international study experiences through this lens. They started their journey understanding Saudi culture as patriarchal, which gave them a touchstone in which to compare Saudi Arabia and the United States. Simultaneously, their U.S. experience provided a point to use for comparison and contrast with their experience at home. They became more aware of, and resistant to, the Saudi Arabian patriarchy after their international studies. This does not mean that the United States is free of its own issues of sexism and patriarchy, only that it made more evident the ways in which sexism and patriarchy were enacted in Saudi Arabia.

Through the interviews these women negotiated their identities and how they made sense of these experiences as well as how they felt they have personally changed during their time abroad. Sharing their personal stories allowed them to explore, organize, construct, and give meaning to their newly developed identities of "being girls" negotiating their place in society. Hamdan (2005) states that, "women's issues in Saudi society and the gender inequalities that are obvious in its education system are institutionalized and difficult to dislodge through individual action" (p. 45). Yet, the personal is political, and although it may be, as Hamdan states, difficult to make wide societal changes through individual action alone, individual actions cannot be

disregarded. According to Biesta, "We cannot act in isolation" (Biesta, 2010b, p. 560).

Rarely do individual acts occur in isolation though, there is almost always an observer.

The individual acts demonstrate alternative ways of behaving that are observed by others;

these acts cannot be unseen, so it then requires an intentional decision by observers to

disregard or ignore these alternative (i.e., new or disruptive) actions, behaviors, words,

and ways of thinking. I assert that these individual acts slowly degrade the unquestioned

hierarchy and patriarchal structure.

These women described how they negotiated their position in Saudi culture using

their transformation from their educational journey as the impetus for changing how they

viewed themselves in Saudi society after their experiences abroad. They were proud of

the ways they learned liberation through their time abroad as well as the way that they

found their voice through the experience. This aligns with Hamdan's (2005) statement

that Saudi women devise their own strategies to challenge gender inequality and achieve

social justice on their own terms. It is particularly important to note that women's

education pre-2002 in Saudi Arabia was overseen by the Department of Religious

Education; now women's education is integrated into the Ministry of Education.

Ultimately, the purpose of educating girls and women was to prepare them to be good

wives and mothers as well as to prepare them for culturally acceptable jobs, such as

teaching and nursing (Hamdan, 2005). In addition, Ross (2008) explains that Muslim

patriarchy is influenced by non-cultural factors, especially oil and gas rents; "Islam is not

the only thing to be blamed in reinforcing patriarchy in Saudi Arabia and where oil

production reduces the number of women in the labor force, which in turn reduces their political influence" (p. 117).

As seen by the examples in Chapter IV, many participants mentioned that sexism and institutionalized patriarchy influenced their educational choices based on the religious rules imbedded in the educational system. Although constrained, they still found themselves in the United States, many of them because of sheer will and intentional moves to be there, creating distinct educational and cultural experiences. The experiences and knowledge gained from being an international student had strong impacts each of the participant's sense of self in relation to being women.

Theme 3: Experiences with Racism and Claiming Pride in their Saudi and Muslim Identities

Many of the participants experienced racism, particularly being targeted when wearing *hijab*. However, their struggles made them realized the power in them and made them find solution within themselves and critically negotiate their intersectionality and claim their voices in the crowd.

It was more difficult to map Brookfield's framework onto my participants' experiences in regard to race and racism. One of the likely reasons for this is the Western context that Brookfield assumes in his research, making it problematic to apply his framework to a non-Western population. In addition, many participants began their experiences in the United States with a limited understanding of racism due to the much more homogenous nature of Saudi Arabia (although much of this is likely also due to the economic class of the women that are able to take advantage of the Saudi scholarship

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program, and the relative light skin that all but one participant had). The most obvious marker of race specificity for these women was *hijab* as without *hijab*, many Saudi women report being viewed as ambiguously brown (which can create other problems and barriers, particularly in a U.S. context that is hostile to Latinx people).

It was interesting to see how my participants used their lifelong experiences of gender-based discrimination to make sense of their experiences of race and religion-based discrimination while studying in the United States. This finding supported my use of Critical Race Feminism in conjunction with Brookfield's seven tasks of transformative learning theory. Examples of this were particularly evident in the first task as the women who chose not to wear *hijab* experienced varying levels of passing as white or ambiguously brown. This ties in with some of the stories that fit in the fifth task as many of them mentioned that the choice to wear or not wear *hijab* related to the way they handled their white American classmates' comments on their bodies and clothing choices. That being said, this movement back and forth between passing and ambassadorship led to many tensions for these women, leading them to constantly perform their Saudi-ness or Muslim-ness in ways that created additional stress in all areas of their lives and creating an additional barrier that impedes their international student experience

Another major point to note is that the stories of race were different for people pre and post 9/11. The ideology changed from being perceived as nice foreigners to threatening brown people, something that Brookfield's tasks could not take into account. This overall made Sara's experiences of studying in the United States different than the

rest of my participants, although it also made her experiences fit more cleanly into his TLT trajectory.

In this section I have attempted to answer the research question, How do the educational experiences and knowledge gained from being an international student in the United States influence how they view themselves? I identified three themes related to this question: (1) shifting identities, (2) "because I'm a girl," and (3) experiencing racism and claiming pride in a Muslim identity. What is foundational to each of these themes is that the experience of being an international student—through academic, cultural, and social experiences—made them aware of differences between their sense of identity in Saudi Arabia and new sense of identity in the United States. While in the U.S. they participated in structures that were different than those of their home country, and these new experiences required the participants to shift their identities of what it means to be, for example, a woman. Whereas in Saudi Arabia, their decisions were negotiated through the dominant male figures in their lives, in the U.S. they could make decisions on their own. Once they returned to Saudi Arabia, the women were transformed (in some ways) so that they could not return to the status quo behavior that was expected of them in their country; they could not go back to how they were before. But the structures in Saudi Arabia had not changed, even if they had, so now they are faced with having to identify and experiment with different strategies for navigating a patriarchy that they now recognize as a structure of oppression. Race in connection to being Muslim also became an identity that all but Salma were newly aware of through their experience in the United States. Whereas in Saudi Arabia their racial identity was invisible, it was very visible in

the U.S., and the women encountered numerous experiences that they eventually understood through the lens of racism. Having to be so aware of it in the U.S. also meant that they were aware of it when they returned to Saudi Arabia, even if it is more difficult to identify. Overall, the international student experience made the women much more aware of their intersectionality, especially related to gender and race. The ability to compare between their time in both countries meant the women engaged in different practices, found different explanations and meanings for experiences, and reflected more fully on how they wanted to be as Saudi women.

My Learning Experience

Biesta (2010a) explains that education is a responsible relationship between humans as individuals as well as actors in the political world. This belief parallels my experience in the Cultural Foundations of Education department, where I learned about power structures in society and how to challenge the norm. It was, and still is, a process of learning that I reflect on regularly.

As a woman and Saudi international student, I faced many of the same struggles as my participants. I have been introduced to different types of education where I have had to think non-traditionally and apply critical thinking. I have challenged myself repeatedly to understand the links in my own educational experiences with the world around me, especially as it relates to being a woman Saudi international student. I am always aware of my Muslim identity, even though I have chosen to not wear the obvious marker of that identity—*hijab*. Bonilla-Silva (2014), Levinson et al. (2011), and Anzaldua (2007) were authors that introduced ideas that aided me in making new

meaning of the world. Their words enraged me at times and at other times their words made me weep. My understanding of education was transformed. No longer was education an academic topic to be studied and researched, education was my lived experience, it was the words people said to me, the looks they gave me, the assumptions they made about me. I was not only reading about racism but could reflect on my own experiences and identify multiple times that racism was a likely factor, and the same with gender.

At first I ran into numerous walls, or barriers, many times until I understood race and culture in a U.S. context. I learned in my studies in the Cultural Foundational department how to interrupt the normal. I learned how to question the power. However, I faced other challenges, where my voice was not heard and not considered useful in classes. Whereas most of my colleagues in class connected and participated in class in ways that allowed them to link their education to their experiences, I was not given the same opportunities. In one particular class, where the teacher invited students to share the connections they were making between the readings and their own experiences, I was the only international student. It was also one of the first classes I took, so I was nervous about how to interact with others and whether they would want to understand my perspectives. When I finally gathered the courage to raise my hand and share my story, the teacher spoke over me and moved the conversation in a different direction. Not only was my voice not amplified, but I had been silenced by my instructor. While I will never know what the teacher's motivation was for moving the class on to a different topic even though I was talking, I will always question whether my minority experience of being a

woman in Saudi Arabia was deemed as not important to the other students' learning in the U.S. classroom.

I have also had many positive educational experiences in the U.S. through which I know that my voice matters. I have learned that through my educational journey, but I do know that I am a minority sojourner and that to some people my voice might not matter as much as the voices of U.S. citizens. I am the Other; it is not merely an academic concept, it is my lived experience (at times). Similar to the participants, who mostly described negative experiences through which they learned about racism and Islamophobia, I am also deeply marked by my own negative experiences. However, rather than allowing those experiences to overshadow or even ruin my relationship to U.S. students, colleagues, and teachers, I have tried to learn from them and use them as the basis for raising awareness. Being the minority, being silenced at times, reinforces why it is so important for me to raise critical questions and assert where, how, and why politics is linked to education. In the field of Cultural Foundations of Education, critical thinkers work to transform knowledge, to connect knowledge with one's own lived experience, and to oppose those who impose hidden agendas. Anzaldua (2007) stated, "Knowing is painful because after 'it' happens I can't stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before (p.70)." This quote deeply resonates with me, and I also believe that it reflects the transformations that occurred for the women I interviewed. We are not the same after our experiences in the U.S.

That incident when I was silenced in the class has been the experience that I cannot let go of. It is the piece of sand that agitates as I learn, that makes me ask

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uncomfortable questions, apply critical thinking to situations, speak up when I experience or witness injustice. I credit that experience with being the catalyst for this dissertation: I wanted to learn and see how my fellow Saudi international women who studied in the U.S. faced such challenges and how they negotiated their intersectionality of being women of color and different than the dominant religion in the U.S. I wanted to know what cultural, social, and academic challenge they faced most, how they went through the whole process of it, and how similar it was to my own experiences studying in the United States.

Brookfield's transformative learning theory resonated with me when I found it. Using the seven tasks, I organize my international experience so that I could analyze it critically. Additionally, I anticipated that it might be difficult for some participants to answer questions in a way that could be considered as speaking negatively about Saudi Arabia, men in their families, and Muslim practices. The TLT framework helped me identify points of criticality within the participants' responses without them having to overtly say something. This is useful because in Saudi culture, women (me included) are raised to always say pleasant things, to not criticize or be skeptical, to not make waves. In other words, the seven tasks amplified different meanings to the women's stories.

Strengths and Limitations of the Research

There is no perfect research study. Through this study I have become aware of the choices I had to make regarding the research, which in some cases had benefits, while in other cases, may have created limitations. I think this especially true of qualitative research, which I think of as being strongly situated in the subjective.

First, there is the fact that this research was conducted by me, an insider to my own topic. I am a woman Saudi international student studying in the United States. Being an insider in this work allowed me to pick up on social cues that a non-insider might not have picked up on and allowed me to conduct my interviews in my participants' native language of Arabic. By speaking in Arabic, I think the participants were able to offer deeper, more nuanced descriptions of their experiences because they were not inhibited by language. My insider status also allowed me to build rapport much more quickly because of the shared experiences I had with the participants. That being said, there are times where my analysis was likely impacted by my own knowledge, assumptions, and experiences that I am not aware of because of my positionality. I did try to limit this sort of impact on the research by writing reflexive memos as well as seeking peer feedback on my coding process. Additionally, I received significant feedback from my chair, Dr. Bettez, and she would question or challenge my interpretations and analysis when she thought I was not providing sufficient evidence.

My original intent was to conduct all interviews in the protocol in the United States. However, due to unforeseen circumstances, I had to conduct the interviews in Saudi Arabia. It is unclear what impact the change in location had on the interviews. It is possible that my participants may have been differently aware of their surroundings in the interview and may have been concerned about giving responses that made them seem ungrateful for their experiences (while similar responses while in the U.S. may have made them concerned about having their international student visa at risk). Overall, I think that conducting the interviews in Saudi Arabia strengthened the research because

the women had time to become more aware of the distinctions in their experiences within the U.S. and in Saudi Arabia.

The phenomenologically-styled, three-interview format I used may not have provided sufficient time to create rapport with participants to get them to be as open as I would like them to have been. I initially thought that the in-depth interviews would be a strength of the study, but it was clear in many of the interviews that I was getting responses that were socially acceptable, although it was unclear if this was because they did not want to be associated with a paper that was critical of Saudi culture or Muslim religion is unclear. Many participants were painfully aware of the Islamophobia and anti-Saudi sentiments that many U.S. Americans hold. I wonder what sort of information could be gleaned from conducting focus groups with Saudi women. Would they be emboldened by hearing the perspectives of other women? Would it encourage them to be less weary because of group interactions rather than a one-on-one interview? Additionally, would responses from the women be different if I had interviewed them in the U.S., as I had originally planned? These questions lead to possible future research avenues.

I also was not expecting there to be as stark of a difference in regard to the impact of 9/11 on my research. I consider this both a strength and limitation at the same time, something that I mention in my section on future research. Salma's experiences compared to the rest of my participants were so different, especially regarding race and racism, that it was difficult to include components of her interviews in my data analysis. At the same time, her participation made apparent the division in experiences based on

9/11, raising my awareness to the racial impact of this political world event. I recommend that future research keep this in mind when considering Islamophobia in the U.S.

While I relied on CRF as a theoretical framework for making meaning of the participants' experiences, I attended more closely to two of the three main social identity constructs within CRF—gender and race—without as much attention to class. CRF and intersectionality call for the consideration of how these three socially-constructed identity categories (at minimum, sometimes also included other categories) interact with each other in order to inform a person's experience of any of the categories independently. Meaning, a white, middle-class woman's experiences of gender are going to be different than that of a Saudi, lower-class woman's experiences of gender because their experiences of gender will be uniquely shaped by their race and class. In this study, racism and sexism were two very clear themes, while I did not observe class receiving attention from the participants. I suspect that this is at least partially due to the participants' middle to upper-middle class identity, which makes it easier to be less aware of class. Additionally, the strong tribal associations in Saudi Arabia mean that class inequalities are not as prevalent or thought of in the same way as in the United States. Whether rich or poor, being part of the same tribe will mean that people are treated similarly within the tribe. It may be beneficial in future research to be more explicitly attentive to the ways in which class is imbricated with race and gender in the experiences of Saudi international women studying in the United States with an awareness toward tribal associations as well.

Lastly, it can be difficult to be an insider in one's own research topic. While it can be beneficial for rapport building with a marginalized community (particularly one that feels like it must constantly be on the defensive as well as trying to be an ambassador), it can also lead to moments where one's own worldview is challenged. For example, I initially expected the participants to know more about their experience of being an international student (as the literature review suggested). I was disappointed with their answers to my follow-up questions; whereas I expected (and wanted) dialectical experiences in these interviews, instead, I sometimes encountered women who seemed to me to be uncritical or unreflective in their responses. At other times though, the women's responses were very evocative and thought-provoking.

Future Research

This research highlighted the voices of a population of Saudi international women studying in the U.S., but also left me with many ideas for future research that could be undertaken. For example, it was interesting to see how the women in my study related their experiences of sexism in Saudi Arabia to their experience of racism while studying in the United States, which left me wondering how male Saudi students experience and make sense of race and racism while studying in the United States.

Along similar lines, the impact of wearing or not wearing *hijab* on my participants leads me to wonder about *hijab* as something that could be explored more for research on women undertaking international study. For my participants, the choice to wear *hijab* became a way that many of them understood themselves as racially distinct from their classmates and not just as an identifier of Muslim-ness. This also leads me to think that

further research needs to have more explicit and targeted questions in regard to race and racism.

Another area of research would be to see the impact of 9/11 on Muslim and/or Saudi students' experiences of studying in the U.S. In many instances, Sara's experiences of being an international student were so starkly different than mine or my participants that it makes me curious about the specific impact of this moment of history on the transformation that Muslim and/or Saudi students go through as international students.

Similarly, future research might consider the length of time that a student is in the United States. Based on my research, the number of years spent in the U.S. impacted the ways my participants viewed race and racism, as well as impacted their trajectory through TLT. As my research parameters only required a woman to have been in the U.S. for two years (the minimum time it takes to complete a master's degree), I had participants who had widely varied lengths of time in the US. It may also be useful to account for how long a participant has been back in Saudi Arabia when they are interviewed as the time since international study may also impact recall as well as their analysis of their academic experiences.

There were two observations within my research that I would encourage more exploration of through future research: (a) community-building in relation to isolation and (b) the participants' use of the word *girl* rather than *woman* as the noun to position their gender identity. What I find most intriguing about the first observation is that, at first, it could appear to be an oxymoron. How do people experience community if they are being isolated by others? At deeper examination though, the participants actively

sought community with other international women students who had also been deliberately isolated. What sort of community develops out of experiences of isolation? Do the isolating acts by others move these women to seek community elsewhere or was it an unexpected outcome? Another observation within my research was the choice the participants made to use the word girl, rather than woman, to ascribe meaning to some of their gendered experiences. From a critical feminist perspective, I wonder if the choice of girl is intentional? Is it a reflection of viewing themselves as girls and not women, or relatedly, would they apply some of the common girl characteristics to themselves (e.g., needing to be taken care of, not able to make decisions for themselves)? It seems counter to the participants' assertions of agency, so what motivates it?

Lastly, different types of research may clarify such analyses as well as amplify the voices of Saudi international women studying in the U.S. For example, focus groups may have allowed the participants to more thoroughly understand their experiences, build rapport, and may lessen their concern have helped them feel as though they did not have to defend their experiences (in their interviews, many of them did not want to appear ungrateful for their experiences through the scholarship program). It would also likely to be helpful to consider a participatory action research approach that involves them in the process, particularly one that allows them to help influence the international student support offices at their universities.

Implications for Practice

This research will hopefully allow for more understanding of the needs of Saudi international women studying in the United States. The findings can be of use to

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classroom educators, administrators (both in the U.S. and in Saudi Arabia), educational colleagues and community members (e.g., other students, tutors, neighbors), and government representatives (e.g., embassy workers) engaging with Saudi international women studying in the U.S. Finally, I hope this research will serve Saudi Arabian women who have and will continue to pursue higher education in the U.S.

Offices for International Students

Within Offices and Departments for International Students, much of the focus is on helping students find housing, learning the target culture's language, and giving the students resources related to where to shop, how to use transportation, and other basic day-to-day practices. It is a disservice to international students to not introduce them to culturally-relevant U.S. topics such as racism, Islamophobia, and sexism, and how they are constructed and enacted in the U.S. I recommend that critical pedagogy be introduced to all international students, if possible. This could be at least shared with them during their International Student orientation. Even learning simple critical reflection practices could be beneficial, if more thorough training is not available.

Teachers

As Henry Giroux argued in *Teachers as Intellectuals* (1988)*,* teachers need to function as "transformative intellectuals" and combine self-reflection in the interest of empowering students with needed skills and knowledge. Teachers can help students understand the social structure and understand more about the world around them. By being aware of the challenges international students might face, educators may be able to help the students to overcome their fears. Introducing critical thinking has contributed so

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many ideas to western society over time. Among the leading critical thinkers, Plato, 1500 years ago argued that education is not about literacy and academic subjects only, rather, it is about community and social justice framed in the notion of truth and transforming knowledge (teaching information to others) (as cited in Plato, Grube, & Reeve, 1992).

International student offices could also create programs to help their staff as well as professors throughout campus understand that these students often live in constant fear of making cultural mistakes that could jeopardize their stay in the U.S. This is a recommendation that Hart (2016) made for faculty members that interact with international students, and I suggest expanding it to faculty and staff campus-wide. Based on my research, I found that when these students do not understand their rights, their experience will likely be hindered.

Colleagues and Community Members

This category includes other international students who are sharing in the educational experience as well as neighbors, fellow students, tutors, and others in the U.S. who care about the experiences that international students have while staying in the U.S. As the research revealed, the participants found community with other Saudi women going through similar experiences. For those who have some exposure the critical theory may be able to support other international students who are unsure of how to interpret experiences that they have – What did this person mean when they said this? Why would someone do this when I join their group for a school project? How do I show my interest in and respect for these new cultural experiences? Additionally, just as my participants identified as ambassadors for Saudi Arabia with U.S. students, there are people in the

U.S. who want visiting students to feel welcomed in the country. It may be very beneficial to people who think of themselves as cultural ambassadors or advocates for international students to learn about these more critical issues so that they can have conversations with sojourners that address these invisible systems.

Government Workers

In many countries there are government offices that focus on assisting people with international travel and study (e.g., cultural mission departments). The people working in these offices are allies to students who help with everything from visas, healthcare, and travel, to adjusting and reorienting to one's home country. As the women in this study identified, fear is a significant emotion throughout the study abroad, from preparation to returning home. It is possible that the emotional stress and uncertainty of living abroad is more significant than how it is currently addressed. It may be beneficial for government workers in these cultural centers, who work with multiple students going through diverse experiences, to validate the various emotions that students will have by, for example, offering workshops as part of pre-orientation and connecting former and new student travelers.

Saudi Women Studying in the U.S.

Finally, to my sisters, I hope that these research findings can provide some validation to the experiences, questions, and challenges they encounter. In the process of this international study abroad experience, it may be useful to think about the gender and race differences between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. Confidence can be useful, so it can be worthwhile to build this confidence through independent study and research, beyond

what may be taught in foreign language classes. Seeking trusted friends and family and asking questions of colleagues who have studied abroad might provide multiple perspectives on what the experiences will be like. This research shows that experiences of sexism and racism are real in this international experience. Being open about this and speaking about it may serve in the process of adjusting to the differences.

Conclusion

Research on interviewing international Saudi women students studying in the United States has been limited. This dissertation used a qualitative research design with elements of phenomenology to highlight the lived experiences of this population. I used Brookfield's (2005) seven tasks of transformative learning theory as well as critical race feminism in order to help make meaning of their academic, social, and cultural experiences. I found that many of these women were aware of their lifelong experiences with sexism, which allowed them to make sense of a new cultural context with new conceptions of marginalized populations, including a different conceptual landscape of race and racism.

This research is important to the body of literature on international students as it focuses on the voices of women students who come from Saudi Arabia, a population that has not been specifically analyzed in this manner. In addition, the experiences shared highlight the struggles that my specific population has encountered as well as the ways they learned to deal with them. This research will hopefully benefit my interviewing international Saudi women students studying in the U.S. in helping them succeed in the United States, not only academically, but also socially and culturally.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Recruitment Script

Hello,

You are invited to participate in a research study that is being completed by me, Noura Abothneen, an International Saudi female graduate student at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Through this research study I seek to learn more about the cultural and educational experiences of International Saudi Female Students. This research study is being done as a part of my doctoral program at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. I am asking you to participate in this research study because I feel that as a current or former female Saudi international student, your experiences, opinions, and ideas about studying in the United States will be valuable to future Saudi women that come to the U.S. to pursue higher education.

The information shared during this research study will be solely held by me and your confidentiality will be protected to the best of my ability by using a couple methods, including using a fake name that you can pick yourself as well as keeping the data secured on my password locked computer. During this research study, I would like to do three face-to-face interviews that will last approximately 1 hour each. These will not take place on the same day. For all of the interviews, I would like to audio record the conversation. I will be the only one using this data and the recordings will be destroyed once the study is finished.

Upon completion of the interviews, I will transcribe them and would like to share them with you for your approval. With your approval, I will then move forward with my write-up. When the project is completed, I can share with you a copy of the final product. At any point in time, your feedback is welcome to ensure that the thoughts and opinions you portray are correctly stated. If at any point in time you no longer wish to participate in the research study you can just let me know and any data associated with you will no longer be used.

There are no significant risks associated with your participation in this research study. The information you provide could lead to a better understanding of female Saudi international students' experiences for myself as well as future researchers.

Thank you so much for your time and consideration.

Please let me know if you would like to participate.

Interview Protocol

Name of Study

Transition Experiences of International Saudi Female Students

Introduction (5 minutes)

Building rapport: Thank you for joining my interview today. Please remember all of your ideas are important to me. There are no right or wrong answers—we are interested in your ideas and experiences.

Introduction of facilitator. My name is _____. I am a doctoral student at _____.

Introduction of study. The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences and challenges of international Saudi female students as they struggle with their cultural, social and academic adjustment. This interview will be helpful for me to understand experiences and challenges of international graduate students. It will take between 40 minutes and an hour to complete each interview. The interviews will be conducted in English.

Permission to record. Your identity will not be released without your permission. That is, I will not report any information that could potentially make you identifiable, like your name, school, or personal characteristics. I will use fake names that you choose beforehand in the transcripts. In addition, the data I collect from this interview will remain confidential. I will be the only one with access to this data.

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. You can choose not to answer a question. Before starting this interview, I would like to get your permission to record this interview. Do you provide permission to record this interview? (the interviewee will answer) Do you have any other questions to ask before moving to the next part? (IRB will be given to the participant to sign if this has not already been done previously.)

This will be the first of three interviews. The reason why I am asking to do three interviews is because I am doing a particular kind of research, called phenomenology. For this type of research, it is important to do all three interviews so I can deeply understand your experiences and so you have time in between to reflect on our conversations.

<center>**In-Depth Phenomenological Interview**</center>

I'm conducting three separate interviews with each participant to plumb their experience and to place it into context.

Interview One: Focused Life History Before Coming to the U.S.

1. I'd like to ask you a few demographic questions:

    a. How long have you been studying in the U.S.?

    b. What is the highest degree you earned?

    c. What is your relationship status?

    d. Do you have any children?

    e. How old are you?

    f. Do you wear *hijab*?

2. Before we talk about your educational experiences, I would like to learn a little about you before you came to study in the U.S.

    a. What does being a Saudi female mean to you?

    b. How would you describe your Saudi culture?

    c. What was life like for you in Saudi Arabia before you came here?

    d. How connected were you to your family and friends?

3. I would like to know about your educational background before coming to the U.S.

    a. How would you describe your academic journey?

    b. How did you do in school academically?

    c. Did you consider yourself a good student? Why or why not?

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      d.   Were you involved in your academic culture? For example, extra curriculars and events?

4. Is there anything else that you'd like to add that I didn't ask about in this interview that is related to your life history before coming to the United States?

Interview Two: The Detailed Experience

1. Why did you decide to come to the U.S. to pursue your education? [Task 1, 7?]

2. What was/is it like being an international female student? Follow up prompts:

    a.   academically

    b.   emotionally

    c.   socially

    d.   What was/is school in the U.S. like for you emotionally and socially?

    e.   Did you have any other international students in your class? Were any of them female? [Task 4]

3. How is school distinct for you here than it was when you were in Saudi Arabia?

4. What does identity mean to you? How has your sense of identity shifted during your study in the U.S. [Task 2]?

5. Are you involved in any extracurricular school activities? Which ones and why? [Task 4, 7?]

6. Talk to me about difficult experiences you had in the classroom.

7. Talk to me about positive experiences you have had in the classroom.

8. Tell me about your favorite instructor.

9. Tell me about the worst instructor you've had and why.

10. What has been most difficult for you about being a Saudi female international student?

11. What do you feel is the biggest challenge you face as a Saudi female international student?

12. Have you ever faced any discrimination or unfortunate incidents? Would like to talk more about it? [Task 4]

13. How often were you asked about your experiences as a Saudi woman? How did that make you feel? Follow up prompts:

    a. Teachers

    b. Peers

    c. Others

14. Is there anything else that you'd like to add that I didn't ask about in this interview to help me understand your transition to being a student in the United States and your overall experience here?

Interview Three: Reflection on the meaning

Now, after you have finished your studies in the U.S., I'm going to ask you some questions about your academic, social, and …

1. Before you came to study in the U.S., how did you perceive your identity as a Saudi woman?

2. Do you think that studying in the U.S. changed your perception of yourself as a Saudi woman, and if so why and how (or why not)?

3. How has studying in the U.S. impacted how you view international education for women?

4. Do you think that you relate with your peers differently now than you did before? Why or why not? Follow-up prompts:

   a. Saudi peers

   b. Other international student peers

   c. U.S. peers

5. Do you think that your experiences as an international student were different than your male international classmates? Tell me more about this.

6. What strategies did you use to cope with your new experiences? Was anything in particular really helpful or not helpful?

7. How have your perceptions of yourself changed since living this educational and cultural experience? Do you use different words to describe yourself than you did before you studied in the U.S.?

8. Given what you've told me about your life both before and during your experience as an international student, how do you understand what it means to be a Saudi female now that you've had the experience in the U.S.?

9. If you ever felt marginalized, how do you think this impacted your learning development while studying in the U.S.?

10. How did your experience of being a Saudi women studying at a U.S. American university impact your learning process?

11. How did your experience of being a Saudi woman studying at a U.S. university impact your life outside school? Follow up prompts:

    a. Family

    b. Friends

    c. Other social situations

12. Is there anything you would change about your experience studying in the U.S.? Why or why not? Follow-up prompts:

    a. Getting involved in campus life

    b. Getting to know certain groups of people better (e.g., U.S. students, international students from other countries, other Saudi students?)

    c. Relationships with faculty members

    d. Getting involved in life beyond campus

13. If you were to give advice to a Saudi woman recently arrived in the U.S. to study here, what would you tell her?

*Is there anything else that you'd like to add that I didn't ask about in this interview or previous interviews related to your experience as female Saudi international student studying at a U.S. university?