Cultural dimensions of conducting educational research: A case study of Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This paper describes a PhD study that explored the re-entry experiences of Saudi international students after studying abroad. The main rationale of the paper is to unpack the cultural and gender-segregated dimensions of conducting educational research to gain an understanding of Saudi Arabian international students’ experiences of returning to Saudi Arabia. The participants in the study were 13 male and 8 female Saudis who spent from two to eight years living in English-speaking countries such as the US, the U.K. and Australia, undertaking postgraduate studies. In terms of methods of data collection, there is no doubt that conducting face-to-face individual interviews would have enabled the researcher to engage and learn what the interviewees thought or felt about their experiences. In fact, similar studies about the re-entry experience usually use face-to-face individual interviews with participants because that is the best method of extracting the experiences of the interviewees. However, this paper, which is based on personal educational research experiences, explores the complexities of conducting face-to-face interviews with individual female participants as a result of the gender-segregated educational practices in Saudi Arabia. Rather than conducting face-to-face interviews with the participants for the PhD study, the interviews were conducted through videoconferencing. This paper discusses how factors such as gender segregation influence educational practices in Saudi Arabia as well as the methodological implications for educational researchers seeking to understand them.

Keywords: Cultural studies, International education, Gender segregation, Videoconferencing, Saudi Arabia.
Introduction

Conducting cross-cultural studies is a challenge for many researchers. Scholars in cross-cultural research state that it is highly important for a researcher to be culturally sensitive when dealing with participants. Researchers should be aware, for instance, of the questions participants are asked and of what is and is not culturally acceptable (Geenhill & Dix, 2008; Liamputtong, 2008). Although culture plays a crucial role in the methodological choices of researchers (De Munk, 2009), culturally sensitive methodologies are still largely neglected with regard to research methods, including qualitative research (Liamputtong, 2010). Moreover, recruiting participants can be problematic for those conducting cross-cultural studies; researchers should understand the background of participants in order to avoid cultural challenges (Irvine, Roberts, & Bradbury-Jones, 2008). Some researchers have suggested that in conducting cross-cultural research, insider researchers who share similar social, cultural and language backgrounds are better than outsider researchers in terms of speaking the same language as the interviewees; understanding local values, knowledge and taboos; knowing formal and informal power structures; obtaining permission to conduct the research; gaining access to records; and easily facilitating the research process (Liamputtong, 2010; Merriam, 1998). Hence, as a researcher from Saudi Arabia studying in Australia and sharing a cultural background similar to that of the participants, I am able to understand some of the cultural dimensions and cultural complexities of Saudi Arabia. This knowledge has enabled me to deal with cultural challenges and to be sensitive in choosing the methodological approach to this study.

This paper draws on a PhD study that explored the re-entry experiences of Saudi international students after studying abroad. The participants in this qualitative case study were 13 male and 8 female Saudis who spent from two to eight years living in the US, the U.K. or Australia, undertaking postgraduate studies. Individual semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from the participants. A review of some of the studies conducted by Saudi researchers revealed that some male researchers avoid conducting interviews with female participants and vice versa due to cultural limitations between genders in Saudi Arabia (see for instance Hakami, 2012; Heyn, 2013). However, as the purpose of this study is to explore the re-entry experiences of returning Saudis, listening to the experiences of both male and female returning Saudi international students would enrich this study because the results will be based on the experiences of both genders—male and female. However, because of cultural factors in Saudi Arabia, where gender segregation is strongly practiced, it was difficult for me to conduct face-to-face interviews with female participants. This factor influenced the methodological choice of this study, as will be explained later in this paper.
This paper starts with defining the notion of culture and addressing factors that have formed the Saudi culture. Then, gender segregation as one of the cultural dimensions in Saudi Arabia is discussed. This is followed by a description of how female education in Saudi Arabia is structured and operated as well as the role of videoconferencing in higher education in Saudi Arabia. This paper also shows how cultural barriers between genders exist as a result of gender segregation. My experience of teaching girls via videoconferencing is presented. How Saudi cultural dimensions influenced my methodological choice is further described. Finally, this paper concludes with some implications and recommendations.

The notion of culture

Culture is one of the most difficult concepts in the human and social sciences, and there are many different ways of defining it (Hall, 1997). Raymond Williams, a cultural theorist, stated that the term ‘culture’ was originally associated with the idea of cultivating crops and animals as, for example, in agriculture. One of the central modern meanings has been derived from this idea of culture as the process of human development (Barker, 2012). Matthew Arnold, an English writer, has an iconic status within the narrative of cultural studies. His definition of culture referred to high culture, which he describes as ‘the best that has been thought and said in the world’ (Arnold, 1966, p. 6). Moreover, Edward Said defined culture as ‘a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society’s reservoir of the best that has been known and thought’ (Said, 1993, p. xii). One the other hand, for anthropologists such as Raymond Williams, culture was understood as a whole way of life and the meaning generated by ordinary people within the culture, and it can be seen in the lived experiences of its participants. William’s definition is also known as a social definition of culture, wherein he considers culture as ‘a description of a particular way of life which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour’ (Williams, 2005, p. 57). Likewise, Stuart Hall argued that culture refers to a whole way of life; he defined culture as ‘the widely distributed forms of popular music, publishing, art, design and literature, or the activities of leisure-time and entertainment, which make up the everyday lives of the majority of ordinary people and is called the mass culture or the popular culture of an age’ (Hall, 1997, p. 2). The definitions of culture proposed by Williams and Hall, who saw it as a whole way of life, are known as modern concepts of culture, whereas the definitions of Arnold and Said, who saw it as the best that has been thought and said in a society, are known as traditional concepts of culture (Hall, 1997).

Other scholars define culture from the perspectives of structure/pattern, function, process, refinement, power, or ideology and group membership. The structural perspective looks at culture in terms of a system or framework of elements (e.g. ideas, behaviour and symbols).
Geertz (1973), for instance, defined culture as a 'historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life' (p. 89). A functional definition looks at culture as a tool for achieving some end, such as the definition by Griswold (2008), who argued that culture is 'the expressive side of human life-behaviour, objects, and ideas that can be seen to express, to send for, something else. This is the case whether we are talking about explicit or implicit culture' (p. 11). A process-based definition focuses on the ongoing social construction of culture. It embodies the process by which a group constructs and passes on its reality, rather than reality itself, handed down to others. Pertaining to this definition, Blumer (1969) maintained that culture as 'a conception, whether defined as custom, tradition, norm, value, rules, or such like, is clearly derived from what people do. Similarly, social structure in any of its aspects as represented by such terms as social position, status, role, authority and prestige, refers to relationship derived from how people act toward each other' (p. 6). A refinement-based definition frames culture as a sense of individual or group cultivation of higher intellect or morality. In line with this, Harrison (1971) defined culture as 'the moral and social passion for doing good; it is the study and pursuit of perfection, and this perfection is the growth and predominance of humanity proper, as distinguished from our animality' (p. 270). A power- or ideology-based definition focuses on group-based power (including postmodern and postcolonial definitions) such as the definition of Allan (1998), who asserted that culture 'functions as an ideology that produces or is based upon a type of false consciousness and works to oppress a group of people, and there is generally an imperative for change that is accomplished, to one degree or another, through the formation of a critical and/or class consciousness' (p. 100). Finally, a definition based on group membership refers to culture in terms of a geographical place or a group of people, and focuses on belonging to such a place or group, as in the definition by Winkelman (1993), who stated that culture refers to 'a group of people, as well as to the common patterns of behaviour which characterize the group and link its members together (p. 86).

In the case of this study, a process-based definition of culture is closely connected to the topic under investigation. Some groups of people who have either religious or political authority have constructed some cultural practices in Saudi Arabia, such as gender segregation. They have passed what they think of as reality to the next generation, and they have conceptualised ideas about how Saudi people should act towards the opposite gender. This issue, in particular, will be discussed later in this paper.
Factors contributing to cultural dimensions of Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia was established in 1932 by King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud, and is located in the south-western part of Asia. It is in the heart of the Middle East and is the largest country in the region. It occupies about 865,000 square miles, approximately 80% of the Arabian Peninsula (Long & Maisel, 2010). Although the total population is around 27 million, it has a very young population; according to the latest official statistics, 79% of the Saudi population is under 40, and 36% of the population is younger than 15 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2014). The country has a unique culture in which 100% of the population is Muslim and, as the birthplace of Islam, is home to the holy sites of Mecca and Madinah, cities that millions of Muslims from all over the world visit and make annual pilgrimages to as a cornerstone of their faith (Long & Maisel, 2010).

As a country that was established just 80 years ago (Al-Rasheed, 2010), there are two main factors that have contributed to and formulated the cultural dimensions of Saudi: politics and religion. On the political side, the regime in Saudi Arabia is considered a monarchy, where the King manages the affairs of the state. He is also the prime minister, who has the ultimate power to make decisions regarding the state. The King must belong to the Al-Saud family and he chooses his crown prince, who will succeed him as king. Royal decisions have the power to change the culture and lifestyle of the people (Al-Khidr, 2011). This can be seen, for instance, in the determination of weekdays and weekends. Since the country was established, weekdays have been from Saturday to Wednesday, and weekends have been Thursday and Friday. This was practiced until 2013, at which time the former king, Abdullah, decided to change weekdays to Sunday through Thursday and weekends to Friday and Saturday, without a poll of the people or a vote to see if they would like the change.

From the religious side, the role of Saudi Islamic scholars has been obvious since the establishment of the first Saudi state (1744–1818), the second Saudi state (1824–1891) and the third Saudi state, known as Saudi Arabia (1932–present). Their roles have been played in various ways, including convincing people that the rulers would establish a new Islamic country and helping people improve their lives. Consequently, some cities, such as Mecca and Jeddah, joined the new country peacefully (Al-Rasheed, 2010). Thus, in most decisions, the King listens to the opinions of Saudi religious scholars in a committee known as the Council of Senior Scholars, chosen by the King. Based on their interpretations of Islam, these scholars, with the agreement of politicians, have formulated some of the dimensions of Saudi culture, such as gender segregation and censorship of some social activities, including banning cinema and preventing women from driving cars (Alhazmi, 2015).
Gender segregation as a cultural dimension of Saudi Arabia

One of the cultural dimensions of Saudi Arabia is the segregation of genders in many aspects of life, including in daily life. The reason for this phenomenon belongs to the interpretation of Saudi Islamic scholars regarding the teachings of Islam. Gender segregation appeared in Saudi culture because those in power constructed it as a reality and passed it on to the citizens. Saudi Islamic scholars promoted the spread of this interpretation in mosques, educational curricula, and by making requests to issue decisions from the King. In fact, older generations of Saudis used to work in agriculture fields together without any physical gender segregation. In other words, the genders mixed and sat together in some areas, particularly in the western and southern regions (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2015). Yet scholars have been able to convince people that mixing between genders is against the teachings of Islam (Al-Qahtani, 2011). Besides the religious factors, politicians have formulated laws that prohibit mixing between genders in public life as well as in education. In 1940, the government established a special police unit called the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice—or religious police—based on recommendations of Saudi Islamic scholars for enforcing public morals such as gender segregation (Al-Azraq, 2012).

The role of the cultural environment in determining how people perceive an issue is obvious. As Abdi (2002) stated, 'culture is simply the world of everyday life where one learns, reacts, and responds to the physical and human environment that surrounds him or her' (p. 71). Together with political leaders, Saudi Islamic scholars have constructed an environment in which Saudi citizens’ perceptions about Ikhtilat (gender desegregation) are contrary to the teachings of Islam. A good Muslim should therefore avoid it. According to the former grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia and Abdul Aziz Bin Baz, Ikhtilat is the gathering of men and non-relative women in one place for educational or business purposes (Al-Azraq, 2012). The key point in this definition is ‘non-relative women’ who includes any women except one’s grandmother, mother, wife, sister, aunt or niece (Al-Toraifi, 2014). Therefore, any gathering between men and non-relative women in one place, either publically or privately, is considered illegal both by religion and by law. Because of this, whoever gathers with non-relative women could be caught and charged by religious police—who is a government agency—; consequently, gender segregation is practiced in many aspects of life in Saudi Arabia, including in the workplace and in educational institutions. To uphold this law, some public areas, such as restaurants and parks, are designed and built to facilitate the gender segregation policy.

Although some writers argue that gender segregation as a phenomenon was not practiced in the past centuries of Islam (Alhazmi, 2015; Van Geel, 2016), there are some famous Saudi
Islamic scholars, such as Abdul Aziz Altoriafi and Saeed bin Ali bin Wahf, who have reviewed hundreds of books, including historical scriptures and have argued that it has been practiced in the past centuries of Islam. Therefore, the scholars of Islam prohibited mixing between genders (Alqahtani, 2011; Altoraifi, 2014). However, some others argue that gender segregation belongs only to Wahhabi scholars’ interpretations of Islam. In general, Wahhabi scholars are perceived to have more severe and stringent interpretations of Islamic teachings compared to other scholars from different groups in various countries of the Islamic world (Alhazmi, 2015). On the other hand, some scholars from different Islamic countries have stated that *Ikhtilat* and mixing between genders is indeed prohibited in Islam. These scholars are not Wahhabi scholars, and include Muhammad Al Khidr Hussain, Muhammad Almesri and Uthman Almesri from Egypt, Ibrahim Alsoudani from Sudan, Ali Altantawi from Syria, Abdul kareamAliraqi from Iraq, Abu Alal Almodowdi from Pakistan, Muhammad Alkhateeb from Lebanon, Abdullah Alqukaiqeli from Jordan, Muhammad Alhilali from Morocco; and some others (Alshehri, 2012; Alazraq, 2012). Actually, gender segregation is practiced more obviously in Saudi Arabia compared to other Islamic countries because of the intertwined relationship between religious scholars and the Saudi kings. The power of the scholars’ interpretations of religion and politics has formed a strong gender segregation culture in Saudi society.

It is worth mentioning here that all of the scholars mentioned above are men and that gender segregation seems to be academically, religiously, legally and politically interpreted and culturally enforced by men. However, regarding the questions raised here, what are Saudi women scholars’ positions on the topic? Where do they stand on the topic of gender segregation? During the literature review for this topic, it seemed that the majority of the famous Saudi women scholars who are specialists in Islamic law, such as Nawal Al-Eid, Malak Al-Johani, Ameerah Al-Saadi and Hayat Baakhdar, agree with the line of the senior Saudi scholars’ opinion that *Ikhtilat* and mixing between genders are prohibited in Islam (Al-Eid, 2006; Al-Johani, 2015, Al-Saadi, 2014; Baakhdar, 2013).

**Female education in Saudi Arabia**

Hall (1997) explained that culture produces shared meaning. Therefore, people who share the same culture ‘interpret the world in roughly the same ways and can express themselves, their thoughts and feelings about the world, in ways which will be understood by each other’ (p. 2). Moreover, Niranjan Casinader, a scholar in the field of culture, wrote a book about culture, transnational education and thinking. Casinader (2014) stated that people from the same culture display some consistencies in their conceptual and thinking skills. Accordingly, there are similarities in the way Saudis think and interpret issues such as the role of females. Saudi
Arabia is considered to have the most conservative culture in the Muslim world (Baki, 2004). Here, the role of women is perceived as limited to being a good wife and, eventually, a mother. Therefore, female participation in public life is very limited. This explains why girls’ education was introduced a decade after boys’ education. The Ministry of Education was founded in 1950 with public schools for boys, not for girls (Al-Munajjed, 1997). During the early years after the establishment of Saudi Arabia, society opposed the education of girls, claiming that it would corrupt girls’ morals and destroy the foundations of the Saudi Muslim family (Van Geel, 2016).

As a result of the discovery of oil, some rich and elite families from the Western Province spent parts of their lives in neighbouring Egypt, either for business reasons or for tourism. Those people lived in and learnt a different culture, and when they returned, they had ways of thinking about women and their roles in society that differed from the dominant culture (Van Geel, 2016). In fact, one of the advantages of living and learning in different cultures is that people can gain transcultural dispositions in their thinking (Casinader & Walsh, 2015). Those Saudi travellers observed the roles of females in Egypt, and they also saw the importance of education for females. Thus, when they came back to Saudi, they appealed to the government to establish schools for girls (Baki, 2004). The government supported this proposal and, in 1955, decided to establish the first girls-only private schools in Saudi Arabia, called *Dar al-Hanan*, in Jeddah. (Van Geel, 2016). Despite public opposition to girls’ education, the government began opening schools for girls only, but did not make female education compulsory at the time. In order to receive support for girls' education, the government put girls' education under the management of Saudi Islamic scholars in an administrative body called the General Presidency for Girls’ Education (Hamdan, 2005).

Since it was founded in the 1960s, the General Presidency for Girls' Education has been responsible for designing and implementing girls' education. The main purpose of girls' education is to bring girls up in a proper Islamic way to perform their duties in life, such as being ideal women, successful housewives and good mothers, ready to do the things that suit their female nature, such as teaching, nursing and medical treatment (Hamdan, 2005). Most of the curriculum in elementary, intermediate and secondary schools was the same for boys and girls, except for the sports unit, which was provided only for boys. The differences are also in terms of another unit, called ‘roles of mothers and housewives’, which was intended for females only (Baki, 2004; Reda & Hamdan, 2015).

Although some argue that Saudi Islamic scholars were against the decision in favour of girls’ education (Alhazmi, 2015), it seems that this was not the case, as the former head of the council of senior scholars, Muhammad bin Ibrahim Al-Shaikh, announced that the council are
indeed against mixing between boys and girls in education, but are not against girls’ education itself (Al-Azraq, 2012). The role of scholars is obvious with regard to encouraging people to teach girls and explaining the roots of girls’ education in Islam as long as there are no negative aspects such as mixing between genders. In fact, the power of the Saudi economy as a result of oil exports facilitated the spread of gender segregation in education, as the government started to build single-sex schools in almost every city and village (Al-Azraq, 2012).

Another cultural dimension that has contributed to the structure of girls' schooling is the fact that men are perceived to be responsible for protecting females. This perception has led to a policy that prevents females from driving cars. This has also led to low participation of women in public life. Girls' schools are surrounded by high walls and backup screens behind the entry doors area. A couple, usually in their 50s or 60s, is assigned to girls' school to protect the girls, verify the identities of everyone entering the school and deliver and pick up mail. The government provides free bussing to schools for girls only. However, since females are not allowed to drive, the busses are driven by elderly men. Girls enter the bus from the back door and are usually supervised by one of the female relatives of the driver (Hamdan, 2005).

**Videoconferencing in higher education in Saudi Arabia**

The system of higher education in Saudi Arabia is different from general education. Male and female students can study at the same university but in different independent buildings with private entrances and exits for each gender. In fact, there are a few females working as teaching staff members, which are not in proportion to the number of girl students. To solve this problem, Saudi Arabian universities offer a new method of teaching by which male teaching staff can teach girls without having direct face-to-face interactions. Universities suggested using videoconferencing as a method of teaching in order to avoid gender desegregation. The Council of Senior Scholars in Saudi Arabia agreed to use this method of teaching because of the necessity for girls to be educated. However, they strongly recommended that both genders speak politely and gently (Council of Senior Scholars, 1996).

Videoconferencing is defined as 'synchronous audio and video communication through computer or telephone network between two or more geographically dispersed sites' (Lawson, Comber, Gage, & Cullum-Hanshaw, 2010, p. 295). During videoconferencing to teach girls, the cameras in the men's section are blocked. The girls can see the male teachers, but the male teachers cannot see the girls. Female teaching staffs are able to join a meeting in the men’s department or faculty through this videoconferencing method.
Videoconferencing is considered an appropriate solution to the dominant culture’s values because it does not allow mixing between genders in educational contexts. Female students have expressed their satisfaction with this method of teaching. A qualitative study conducted by Reda and Hamdan (2015) confirmed this. In order to collect data for their study, the researchers interviewed 80 female university students in Saudi Arabia, who were taught by male professors via videoconferencing and by female professors through face-to-face interaction. The study showed that 85% of participants reported that they prefer to be taught by male professors because of the quality of their teaching. Unlike female teaching staffs, who are usually tough in their teaching, male professors are preferred because of their ‘soft’ teaching styles. In fact, some researchers, such as Casinader (2015), have pointed out the need for comparative education to embrace a new focus on the learning process and how this is affected by culture. Hence, this paper also explains how some cultural perspectives in Saudi culture, such as gender segregation, have influenced the educational and research process in Saudi Arabia.

**Cultural barriers between genders**

Barriers and limitations between genders in Saudi Arabia have emerged as consequences of gender segregation policy. One of the reasons for these barriers is related to the concept of representation in gender relations. Representation means ‘using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people’ (Hall, 1997, p. 15). In the context of Saudi culture, non-relative men are represented as ‘human wolves’ who are looking for the opportunity to sexually abuse women. At the same time, women are represented as a ‘tool’ to satisfy men's sexual desire. It is not culturally, socially or legally accepted for a man or a woman to make contact with the opposite gender in order to build a relationship. This representation of men has made many girls feel afraid to go outside the home without a male relative. They are afraid of being assaulted. In this cultural climate, men avoid talking with non-relative women, and vice versa. Therefore, it could be said that most Saudis lack skills and experience in dealing with the opposite gender. The same was true for me until I had an opportunity to enhance my experience in dealing with the opposite gender in 2012, as described in the following section.

**My experience in teaching girls via videoconferencing**

In 2012, during my work as a teacher and researcher in the Faculty of Education at Umm Al-Qura University, I was chosen by the head of the department to teach some units for girl students via videoconferencing. I was in my mid-20s at that time, and I had not had any contact with women other than my relatives. I tried to convince the head of the department that I was not the right person to teach the girls, but he said the workloads of the other
teaching staff were full and I was considered the only one who could do it. I finally agreed to take the role.

As there were no workshops to train staff on how to teach girls via videoconferencing and how to deal with girl students, I started self-training by asking some expert staff about their recommendations and advice on how to teach girls via videoconferencing. Frankly, although it was my last semester teaching at the university before moving to Australia for further studies, I found the experience a good preparation for dealing with the opposite gender in an educational context. At the beginning, I was nervous and afraid to do or say anything unacceptable to the girls. However, once I learnt some skills for dealing with female students; I understood what questions I could ask and how I could ask them. Some years later, this experience has helped me feel comfortable conducting interviews with females via videoconferencing.

How Saudi cultural dimensions influence my methodological choice

From a theoretical perspective, there is no doubt that conducting face-to-face interviews with participants is important in educational research (King & Horrocks, 2010; Wengraf, 2001). In fact, similar studies about re-entry experiences usually use face-to-face individual interviews with participants because they are the best method of extracting the experiences of the interviewees (see Arouca, 2013; Casteen, 2006; Cox, 2006; Fridhandler, 2006; Guerrero, 2006; Gray, 2014; Lester, 2000; Shougee, 1999). As an alternative to face-to-face interviews, using technologies such as videoconferencing is also useful and can result in rich data (Bertrand & Bourdeau, 2011; Trier-Bieniek, 2012). However, conducting face-to-face interviews with female participants in my doctoral study presented a challenge. As a Saudi with a similar background to that of the participants, I knew that conducting face-to-face interviews with female participants was not possible in Saudi Arabia due to the gender segregation policy. For this reason, the interviews were conducted using videoconferencing. As previously mentioned, I am familiar with this type of technology because I taught female students in 2012 when I was working at Umm Al-Qura University as a teacher. Similarly, the study participants are teaching staff at the same university, and they use this technology to attend a department or faculty meeting. They also experienced this technology as students when they were taught by male teachers. Creighton and Adams (1998) suggested that once participants become familiar with the videoconferencing technology, it is more effective than face-to-face meeting.

Based on my experience of data collection, I found that during the interviews, there were different ways of building rapport with male informants compared to female informants. As it is essential for interviewees to feel comfortable (Lichtman, 2006), in the case of interviews
with male participants, it was easy for me to build rapport and put interviewees at ease. Before the interviews, we sat together, had some coffee and talked informally about ourselves. We made some jokes. However, it was not easy to build rapport and put female interviewees at ease. I introduced myself and explained the protocol and the statements of confidentiality, consent, options to withdraw and the use and scope of the results. But there were no jokes or informal conversations before the interviews.

I agree that it is crucial to put participants at ease and build trust between an interviewer and interviewees before asking participants to answer questions and talk about their experiences. However, I do not think that the absence of jokes and informal conversations with female participants affected the results of my data collection. I noticed that I generated rich data from the interviews with female participants. They talked about a lot of interesting topics, such as women’s inability to drive cars in Saudi; challenges with some cultural norms, like the role of Mahram for females, and spinsterhood; missing freedom; and third culture kids, as will be detailed in my full thesis. Furthermore, conducting interviews with females made me modify the way questions were asked so they were more formal and polite in the Arabic language. The modified language, for instance, can be seen from the following expressions. Rather than saying ‘What is your name?’ I changed it to ‘Could you please tell me about your name?’; ‘How old are you?’ was modified to ‘If you do not mind, how old are you?’ The total number of interviewees was 21 altogether (13 males and 8 females). As additional information about the participants, 14 were employed when they returned to Saudi Arabia and 7 were unemployed when they returned to Saudi Arabia.

**Conclusion and implications**

When conducting educational research that involves interviewing female participants in Saudi Arabia, it is important to be aware of issues regarding how to deal with the opposite gender, as these issues are considered very sensitive in Saudi Arabia. To deal with this challenge, it is important for researchers to modify their methodologies to accommodate the gender segregation culture. As a method of data collection, for example, female participants can be interviewed via videoconferencing. Researchers also have to be careful about their questions and the way they deliver them. In fact, researchers need awareness of this issue and appropriate suggestions from local Saudi experts.

From the historical perspective, religious and political factors have shaped gender segregation culture in Saudi Arabia since the establishment of the country. This culture has become widespread in the society; it has contributed to re-shaping the identity of Saudi citizens. However, since the onset of modern globalization in the 1990s (Casinader, 2015), the world is increasingly constituted by flows of finance, technology and people, through tourism,
education and migration (Rizvi, 2005), and globalization has re-shaped peoples’ identities and their social imaginations into hybrid identities (Rizvi & Walsh, 1998). Cultural hybridity is an effect of globalization where the differences between cultures are assimilated through the mixing of global culture with local culture (Bhabha, 1994). As the study participants have been living in the West for some time—mostly between two and eight years—their identities have been hybridized and affected by different cultures. They have lived and studied in mixed-gender environments and have adapted themselves. Hence, their perceptions of the opposite gender have changed. In my opinion, returning female Saudis are capable and skilled enough to deal with male Saudis politely and to show respect regardless of the Saudi culture, which warns the genders from mixing and talking to each other. Thus, in this study, female participants agreed to be interviewed by a male Saudi interviewer in order to share their experiences.

This paper has discussed one of the cultural dimensions of Saudi Arabia, which is segregation between genders in educational contexts. In the context of my PhD study, it is clear that Saudi culture influenced my methodological choice. In fact, Saudi culture has changed my method of conducting interviews. Because of the culture of gender segregation in Saudi Arabia, interviews with female participants were conducted using videoconferencing and phone calls instead of face-to-face interviews. This method of interviewing is not commonly practiced by other researchers; most of them employ face-to-face interviews. However, I found that the absence of such direct face-to-face interviews for data collection did not negatively affect the richness of the data I gathered. The data were indeed rich and complex.

There are several reasons that conducting interviews with females via videoconferencing was successful. First, my own and the participants’ previous experiences using this method made us all feel comfortable with the mode of communication. Second, the nature of participation was voluntary. The participants agreed to participate because they felt that they had interesting experiences to share with a male interviewer. Third, the female participants’ experiences of living and learning in a mixed-gender environment during their studies abroad gave them experience with dealing with the opposite gender, which made them more willing to talk with me.

Based on the experiences and perceptions outlined in this paper, I recommend that Saudi researchers of both genders do not hesitate to conduct educational research with the opposite gender using the available technology, such as videoconferencing, as an alternative method for data collection. In fact, there is an unjustified gap between the genders as a result of some cultural factors from the past. To gain more realistic interactions in a globalized world, I think it is important to revisit and review parts of the existing Saudi culture, particularly the issue of
gender segregation. This review should lead to the possibility of accepting and practicing different interpretations of Islamic law in Saudi Arabia.
References


