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Michelle Glowacki-Dudka
Ball State University, USA

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Going to Teach and Getting Taught in Saudi Arabia: An Auto-Ethnography

Michelle Glowacki-Dudka
Ball State University, USA

Abstract: This study examines cultural consequences of working in Saudi Arabia. Findings demonstrate that absence of preliminary understanding of cultural differences may adversely impact relationships, both personal and professional.

Background and Context

In 2002, I accepted an invitation to work at a women's college in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia as an instructor in Curriculum and as Director of Continuing Education. In light of current world events, Saudi Arabia has gained a significant presence in the American mind. The mystique of the culture was difficult to penetrate even when working daily with colleagues and students in an educational setting. AJ, whose invitation I accepted, had been a good friend while we studied together in our doctoral program in the U.S. We collaborated on research and projects in classes. Our families were close. We interacted and ate together. We were sisters here. As an American woman with a Saudi friend, I expected and assumed much about the Saudi culture that proved very different in real experience.

Purpose Statement

I choose to complete this research to better understand my experience teaching for a semester in 2002 at a newly-established women's college in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Five years later, my knowledge and familiarity with the Middle East has significantly improved. My relationship with AJ has not. The current case study will examine data from my journals and field notes written in Jeddah, and from more recent reflection and analysis. I will use ethnographic methods to tell a story that will contribute to the literature on women's issues in the Middle East and life in Saudi Arabia.

The two selves, the one in Saudi in 2002, and the reflective, present one as a professor in Indiana, are represented in the text, but are very different. My reflections as I wrote this piece, and from the auto-ethnographical interviews, are inserted into the text with an italicized font.

As I begin this research, I am hesitant about what may be the outcome. The person I am now is definitely not as innocent or naïve as the person I was when I wrote these letters and diaries. I am now more cynical about politics, gender roles, the meaning of education, what relationships are built upon.

Theoretical Framework (Hofstede) and Method (Case Study)

My theoretical framework for this case study is based in Geert Hofstede's™ Cultural Dimensions ("Geert Hofstede™ Cultural Dimensions", ND). Hofstede developed a model that identifies four primary dimensions to assist in differentiating cultures: Power Distance - PDI, Individualism - IDV, Masculinity - MAS, and Uncertainty Avoidance - UAI (Hofstede, 2001). Three of these differences played

significant roles in my experience working at the college and in my relationship with the family who invited me to come “help” them. Before accepting the position, AJ reassured me that it would not be much different from the world we shared in the US, but our relationship was influenced adversely by misunderstandings of cultural differences.

Using Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions as a theoretical lens, this study digs deeply into my experience in order to understand and provide evidence of the multiple facets within Saudi culture that challenged my understanding of personal friendship and collegiality.

Expectations and Assumptions

Having been assured that working in Saudi Arabia would be consistent with how we worked in the U.S., I expected from my friend that she would be my collaborator and that we would develop and provide continuing education programs for the college. I expected that I would be taken into her family as a colleague and friend, and that we would have the same relationship at work and at home. I wanted her to be my cultural translator and to show me how to work within the norms and expectations of the society, while still respecting me as a peer and equal.

Graduating from the same doctoral program in adult and continuing education, I assumed that my friend and I had learned the same things and had attached the same definitions and applications to concepts such as leadership, collaboration, program planning, evaluation, administration, and education. I also assumed that even though the cultural context would be different in Saudi Arabia, the American approach would resonate with the policies and program in this newly established “liberal arts” college for women. I believed we would work together as equals to make the office successful.

I also believed that each person is worthy of respect, even though they may be of different classes, races, nationalities, religious affiliations, and family groups. I assumed that if I treated people with respect, they would give me the same courtesy. As an American woman with a Saudi friend, I expected and assumed much about the Saudi culture that proved very different in real experience, challenging my understanding of our intimate friendship.

Problem Statement

In Saudi Arabia, I took on many roles: as teacher, as administrator, as observer, as participant, as friend, as colleague, as covered woman, as foreigner. Through its segregated society, each woman wears many faces publicly and privately. The variation between each of these faces was surprising and challenging to me as I lived and worked within this culture for six months. This is a theme that recurs in my findings again and again. As a straightforward, sincere, transparent, uncovered American woman, it is the theme that is most difficult to embrace. Yet, in Saudi culture, this ability is how women can compartmentalize their lives, to grow and challenge and think critically in one part of their lives, while they conform and survive in another part of their lives.

Data Collection -- Discussion of the Experience

My relationship with AJ and her family was the incentive for me to go to KSA and dominated much of my experience there. She invited me to come and “help” her. I asked her “how would our relationship work?” I did not intend to be her subordinate. But when I arrived, I discovered that AJ expected me to be her assistant, with no partnership

or respect for my ability to do my work. To my surprise, AJ acted arrogantly, apparently believing that everyone around her was meant to serve her whims and support her moods. I was shocked, disappointed, and disillusioned by the way she treated me and the other people that she worked with. Looking back, I probably should have asked more about my role within the college and the culture. Yet, I wanted to be open to the experience and not let others opinions prejudice me, so I deliberately avoided reading and listening to material about Saudi Arabia.

I spent the first two weeks living with my friend and her family in a house in an international compound. In the evening, we often came back to her home, had dinner, and went out shopping or looking for houses for them to buy or rent. One morning we went with her husband to take their son, Faisal, to school. I was surprised that she would include me on such a personal issue; I was also surprised that she expected me to take her side against the administrators and counselors at the school.

(January 22, 2002). The Australian principal believes that Faisal needs special help, but [my friend] wouldn't agree to testing or to sharing the records. She doesn't want to realize that there could be anything "wrong" or "different" with her son, so she completely discredited the principal and disregarded his statements. She just kept reiterating that Faisal should sit in the front of the room without any distraction on the walls. That is not what school is about and she should know it.

At the college, I was surprised by the diversity of the faculty and staff. The faculty came from across the world. Most of the administrators were Saudi or American. As a woman with a Ph.D., my friend had a high-ranking title, but was placed in an office outside of the main administrative building. I joined her and her secretary in this office suite with the goal to develop the continuing education programs for the college. Early on, I tried to understand why I was there and what my role was to be at the college. When I did not understand the vision from my friend, I went to ask one of the other American administrators. Betsy was the vice dean of finance and the highest ranked administrator on campus while the dean was traveling, so I went to meet with her, much to my friend's dismay.

(January 29, 2002). At work, I am trying to figure out what our goals are and what the vision of the school is. So I went to ask Betsy. AJ became so offended that I said two words to Betsy about what we are doing that she pulled rank and said that I must tell her any interactions that I have with the other Vice Deans. Basically she implied that there should not be any communication with the others. We have to go through "formal communication channels." This is not how I work and it is not what I agreed to. I want to be part of a decision-making team working together here at the College.

As I began to work, I stayed close to AJ. We would talk about plans for the office and walk around the campus. My role was very undefined and she did not have a good vision as to the tasks or purpose of the office.

(February 12, 2002). What a couple of crazy stressful days at the office. We really need to figure out what my role is so that I can feel like I am contributing without harming AJ and her position. I would much prefer to collaborate and share ideas than to not communicate and hide my thoughts. What a strange working environment.

At the beginning of the semester, there was a two-week break for the annual Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca for Muslims. During this break from the semester, my husband and I joined my friend and her children in Egypt. Although we had different itineraries, we

were able to meet once in Cairo. When we returned, my husband left for the U.S. and I stayed behind to continue to work with or “for” AJ. It had become much more difficult.

(March 1, 2002). AJ is holding the reigns on the classes very tightly, afraid to move ahead, make commitments, order supplies and books. How can I work in this type of environment? Her fear and intimidation is going to wreck any plans that she can put together. This isn't how I work and it makes me concerned about what will happen in the future.

Shortly after returning from the break, the dean asked me to do an assessment of teaching and learning at the college. AJ was disappointed that she was not the one asked to carry out this important task. Her physical health also seemed to be worsening.

(March 10, 2002). AJ is jealous that I am doing evaluation and assessment and she wasn't asked although "she spent 10 years of her life studying and devoting her time" to this subject. I keep trying to explain that a Ph.D. only means as much as the person who you are working with values it. I really don't know what to do about AJ except keep work very separate from our home friendships, since I am really dependent on them for socialization and transport and entertainment. I am truly worried about her health. Every day she complains of headaches and dizziness. It's not good.

Finally AJ had prepared a series of continuing education courses for women in the community related to interior design, English language, and Islamic Arts. In order to promote the courses, she received permission to travel around town and share them with offices that serve women, other college programs, and beauty parlors where women gather. On a few occasions she invited me to join her in these visits. I got to see a side of her that I had not seen before.

(March 14, 2002). On Wednesday, a driver took AJ and I to five places (two banks and two public women's colleges and the ministry of labor) to distribute fliers for our courses. She is doing better this week. As she was selling our programs to the people across town - she was speaking Arabic and was really a different person - persuasive, friendly, chatty, and strong. Not a face she shows at the college or speaking English very often - especially with people she doesn't know or trust.

Shortly thereafter, AJ went to attend a conference in Riyadh and visited her sisters for a few days, leaving me in the office. I finally felt free to be competent and get some work done, but she was not ready to give up any power.

(March 19, 2002). On Sunday, she flew to Riyadh for a conference. She said – “call me if you have to make any administrative decision.” For goodness sake, why doesn't she trust me?

While AJ was gone, I met with the dean and a consultant who was visiting the campus. The dean put it best by saying the “AJ thinks everyone is her enemy.” I agreed: in the context of work this seemed very true. I don't know how she viewed other friends, but she showed me a different face outside of work. I also was able to arrange a class to prepare for the SAT at the local high school that my friend had ignored when it came to her desk. I felt like I had actually accomplished something in the office. However my friend took the actions completely differently.

(April 3, 2002). I got back to work with an ashen faced AJ who wouldn't even look at me... Easter Sunday, AJ was not in any mood to talk. I asked her on Saturday “let me know how I can help you” She replied “if I need you or want your help, I will ask.” OK fine. I get the anger. She cried, and told me how I betrayed her by talking to [the

other administrators] without telling her, how I was forcing her to leave, and how she didn't care about the work - but our friendship was the biggest loss. She wished me luck and said "give me some time." She didn't trust me from day one to do any work or interact with the other administrative people. Each time she looks or speaks to me now, she gets tears in her eyes. She started talking about all the ways I betrayed her and made her look bad by going and asking for information about doing the work or sending emails that she didn't critique or censor, and especially the SAT that I did without her explicit permission. You know, sometimes someone will tell you that you are their best friend, and you think to yourself - how nice - but don't have the same passion for or desire to be their best friend back. Now what do I do...

(Later that day) After crying and realizing I had to change my perspective and relationship with this place - since I lost my bearings as my friend has slipped away - I am coming to terms that she is lost to me. I couldn't be the silent agreeable conscience always standing next to her side, waiting on her every word that she wanted me to be. She kept saying "talking to me was like talking to herself" - more than a friend and more than a sister - how can I stand up next to that expectation?

Very sad - very, very sad to lose a close friendship like this -- but I will do my best at work and will wait and be cordial with AJ while I am here and I will be home in Summer. If she changes her mind about the situation, I will be open to her.

(April 6, Attempted Reconciliation) AJ and I had lunch together in [the mall] (neutral territory). She looked tired, but better and she only got teary twice. It sounds like she is trying to re-evaluate her life, family, and job (which is badly needed)... Our relationship as it had been is over.

Reflection and Analysis

As I reflect on the experience, it seems that the problems between AJ and me were more cultural than personal. When AJ was in the U.S., she adjusted her behaviors as to embrace the principle of "Do what the Romans do." However, when she was in her 'natural' setting, she expected me to do what she did: "To do what the Saudis do." Her changing behaviors caused me great confusion and led me to understand that AJ had many different 'faces'. For the same reasons, I struggled with a love-hate feeling for AJ. I was there to help her and support her, but she was not able to reciprocate. Therefore I was very disappointed by AJ's other 'face' as a Saudi in her natural setting. I was surprised, confused, and hurt by the change in our relationship.

The difference in our roles was most difficult for me to embrace. Had my friend understood the differences in the two cultures and communicated her expectations early on, it would have been easier for me to understand, although I still probably would not have complied. My scholarship in adult education, critical thinking, and democratic power structures drives me to break down hierarchy and power. My education also has taught me that all people have value and deserve courtesy and respect. To place one person over another, through organizational hierarchy, clan, or social class, offends my nature in a world where I believe that all human beings are equal.

Conclusions

Through the process of reframing this experience within the Hofstede cultural competencies, I can understand much better what happened. According to Stephen Taylor, "Large Power Distance (PDI) (80) and high Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) (68)

are predominant Hofstede Dimension characteristics for the countries in this region. They are highly rule-oriented with laws, rules, regulations, and controls in order to reduce the amount of uncertainty.” (ND) In this experience, I brought my conceptualization of effective leadership to the college and collegiality to the relationship with AJ. I expected people to share my perspective for democratic governance to break down power to enhance creativity, and my attempts to foster a collaborative attitude among everyone at the college. On the other hand, AJ expected that I realized that the power structure and dynamic at the college was not the same as the way it is in the U.S. It frustrated AJ to think that I ‘humiliated’ her authority by talking directly to and initiating her ideas with the dean or vice-deans, which she considered to be ‘disloyal’. This was especially clear when AJ cried “about all the ways I betrayed her and made her look bad.”

This UAI served to paralyze AJ in her role as head of the continuing education program. Since the office was to be developed without specific direction from an authority, AJ felt very unsure in making decisions or in even setting up plans for the programs. Her lack of direction, or freedom of decision-making, strangled my ability to work with her. When I finally had a chance to “do something” while she was gone, the dean punished her for “not having control of her employees.”

In addition, “The lowest Hofstede Dimension for the Arab World is the Individualism (IDV) ranking at 38, compared to a US ranking of 91” (“Geert Hofstede™ Cultural Dimensions”, ND). In this kind of society, each clan member is responsible and expected to be involved, to defend, and protect the dignity of other clan members at any domains, including personal and professional matters. At the beginning of the experience, it is clear that AJ saw me as a member of her tribe or clan by taking me to her son’s school and expecting me to act as a sister to her. When I went to work at the college, I was to defer to her and know my place within the hierarchy and within her clan. I was to protect her status and position within the work and clan at all costs. As time went on and I began to make new friends, work on various projects, and travel in different circles, she felt that I betrayed her clan as well.

The differences in cultural norms that my friend and I had grown up with were embedded in our different understandings of the world. Although she was able to come to the US and adopt some of our norms, she still had not let go of the Saudi norms. When she returned home, the transition back to those norms came easily to her; she may not have been aware of the significant differences in expectations and assumptions.

Outcomes, Understanding, Wisdom

The entire story must be seen as evidence of the multiple realities within the Saudi culture. Through this reflective auto-ethnographic process, I have come to a better understanding of this relationship and how conflicting cultural norms shaped my actions and experience. The way the relationships in the study progress are constructed through the eyes of culture and understood truths that differ significantly from one another. When stepping back from the participant role, it becomes clearer how things are interpreted through each person’s emotional and cultural and contextual state. Hopefully through this process, I have gained some wisdom about Saudi Arabian culture.

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