“We Are Back”: Reverse Culture Shock Among Saudi Scholars After Doctoral Study Abroad

Miriam Alkubaidi1 and Nesreen Alzhrani1

Abstract
The experiences of individuals returning to the most conservative countries from abroad are not being recorded. The present study explores how Saudi scholars working in the higher education sector readjust and reconnect to their workplace after completing their doctoral scholarships abroad. The study has adopted a narrative approach and used the transformational learning theory to account for reverse culture shock. Six assistant professors (three males and three females) from three Saudi universities were recruited and they underwent 30- to 50-min-long semi-structured in-depth interviews. The data were analyzed through thematic analysis and the developed themes included emotional adaptation to home culture, adaptation to their work in their home culture, adaptation of families to home culture, and reentry coping mechanisms. The results depicted how the participants readjusted to their context after extended study abroad. They returned with new identities shaped by their life and education abroad and by their exposure at university to people from different cultural backgrounds. They also became used to a more comfortable lifestyle in their host countries. The study concludes that there is a need to prepare and organize programs that could assist Saudi new returnees to readjust and reconnect to their context again. Moreover, it would be useful in helping universities prioritize their staff’s well-being and design rehabilitative courses for new returnees helping them integrate into their workplace.

Keywords
abroad, English language, reverse culture shock, Saudi higher education, Saudi scholars

Introduction
In 2005, King Abdullah’s Scholarship Program launched and allowed many Saudi students to travel abroad. From 2005 to 2012, a total of more than 7,000 doctoral students traveled to the United States, Europe, Australia, and Asia, with many of these students returning to continue their work at Saudi universities (Saudi Arabia Ministry of Higher Education, 2016). The main objective of sending these students abroad was to make them globally competitive and enrich their experience. This helps them to contribute toward the development of Saudi Arabia, given the limited number of graduate programs in the country (Yakaboski et al., 2017).

The change in perceptions and lifestyle varies based on their years of living abroad, age, and cultural differences; however, it is common that what was perceived as normal and natural before they left was perceived to be strange upon returning (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). This is because the cultural practices in Saudi Arabia differ from those practiced abroad. For instance, in Saudi Arabia, the traditional role of women was limited to household management and relevant activities. In particular, the segregation found in most sectors of Saudi society was generally not practiced abroad (Geel, 2016). Consequently, Saudi women in particular face a struggle as they return to their conservative home country where restrictions are imposed on them.

The existing literature does not focus on the experiences of these returning Saudi students (male and female), which creates a gap and a need to highlight these experiences and its unique form of reverse culture shock among Saudi students. Therefore, the present study aims to explore how six Saudi professors of both genders men and women working in the higher education sector readjust and reconnect to their workplace after returning from abroad, using a narrative qualitative approach. The focus of the present study is on the Saudi professors’ readjustment and reverse culture shock.

Literature Review
Culture shock was explained by Oberg (1960) by the involvement of feelings such as anxiety and stress experienced when...
returnees try to adjust to the cultural and social norms of host countries. According to Oberg’s (1960) discussion, adaptation to a different culture was often attached to a painful journey toward an understanding of the codes and norms of the host culture. Within this process, individuals experience various incidents or events, which shape their personalities and beliefs. A review of available literature emphasizes the significance of time, particularly at the initial transitional phase that the returnee experiences before resettling and reigniting their sense of belonging at home. Other themes addressed in the empirical literature include reverse culture shock (Gaw, 2002), transnationalism (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015), cultural identity (Sussman, 2002), and internal conflict (Christofi & Thompson, 2007). These studies relied on different data collection methods and a mixed-method approach but were unified by the interest in the change that occurred among the participants and the way they readjusted to their home country’s culture after their return from abroad.

**Transnationalism**

Transnationalism can be described as “the ways that the everyday practice of ordinary people, their feelings, and understanding of their condition of existence, frequently modify those very conditions and thereby shape, rather than merely reflect, news modes of urban culture” (Smiths 1992, quoted in Mahler 1988, p. 67, cited in Sarmistha, 2019). We chose Gu and Schweisfurth (2015) as an example study because it deals with transnationalism through the lenses of both culture and identity.

Gu and Schweisfurth (2015) investigated the identity difference that resulted from an extended stay abroad. The study focused on transnationalism that is a pattern of migrant flow identity, which finds comfort and security in a diverse network of interconnections (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015).

Similarly, Sussman (2002) discussed cultural identity and changes among 113 Americans who joined the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program, an initiative to bring native English speakers into Japan as English teachers, sponsored by the Japanese government. The data indicated no significant relationship between successful adaption to the culture of the host country and painful adaptation to one’s own culture when returning home. The second finding was related to the strength of cultural identity. Americans with strong cultural identities were able to reconnect to their home culture and adapt again to American life, whereas those with weak cultural identities found it stressful and complicated to do so and felt like strangers.

**Cultural Identity**

Returnees from sojourn countries often struggle to reconnect with their own culture. The peculiarity of the Saudi case comes from the fact that the Saudi context has specific social and cultural norms that were rarely shared by other contexts across the world. For example, women and men were segregated in Saudi Arabia but not abroad, especially in education destination countries, but they were again segregated upon returning to their home country. Thus, it is anticipated that their perspectives and attitudes toward these received values and principles may alter as a consequence of their extended stay in the host countries. This shift may result in the adaptation and embracement of new cultural identities along with the support of different values and norms.

Another study, by Le and LaCost (2017), suggested similar experiences among Vietnamese students who returned from the United States after graduating from higher education institutions. It was found that students’ personalities and beliefs had dramatically changed after being exposed to the American culture for a long time and that this resulted in conflicts with their families and professional networks, although they still appreciated the change. The participants thus found it challenging to fit again into their home culture and working environment. Some of them claimed that they wanted to return to the United States while others believed that readjustment might take longer than anticipated.

**Internal Conflict**

Comparing between the host country and home country is an emergent expectation that could cause returnees to struggle in readjusting to their home country and the conditions of life and work. According to Christofi and Thompson (2007), this comparison may result in a conflict that occurs when returnees feel uncomfortable and estranged from their home country’s culture and want to go back to the comfort of the host country. Their study drew its finding from phenomenological interviews with participants from Cyprus, Russia, Germany, and Liberia who had spent time in the United States and England. The interview revealed that participants generally did not want to stay in their home country and wanted to return abroad. Similarly, Kartoshkina (2015) conducted a survey, followed by a semi-structured interview for examining the experience of 67 U.S. college returnees from countries such as China, Mexico, Greece, Australia, and Spain. The experience was described as bittersweet; they were excited about going back to the United States but sad to say goodbye to friends and the lifestyle they had adopted in their host countries. They also mentioned the difficulty of describing experiences gained from being abroad to friends and family, as no one could imagine their lives in their host country. This experience has opened doors for students to compare life in the United States and abroad. They explained that they missed the well-developed public transportation and the slow pace of life abroad. Students also developed a critical perspective toward many aspects in the United States such as U.S. values, style of life, social system, but they simultaneously appreciated the freedom of choice and the education system found in the United States.
Theoretical Underpinnings of the Study

This study is based on a constructivist paradigm, wherein knowledge is socially constructed and designed to capture realities holistically and to discern implicit meaning in human activity (Guba, 1990). Following Merriam’s (2006) framework in which she used an adult learning theory to understand how her participants construct meaning, this study uses a qualitative method featuring open-ended interviews based on the transformational learning theory suggested by Mezirow (2000). It uses Mezirow’s (2000) “disorienting dilemmas,” which is the participants’ emotional adaptation to their home culture and workplace at their home culture after being abroad for a long time. As part of their adaptation, they face cultural issues that they need to deal with. Hence, this study has used an aspect of the transformative theory, which is the cultural spiritual view (Taylor, 2017). In this view, the study investigates how the change of culture may influence the meaning-making process of their adaptation experience and how they cope with it (Tisdell, 2003).

The study is particularly interested in the participants’ adaptation to their home culture, their work in their home culture, their families’ adaptation to home culture, and coping mechanisms. Studies have focused on the experience of Saudi scholars during their stay in the host country; however, the returning experience of Saudi scholars coming back from abroad has remained limited (Almutairi, 2018). Thus, the research questions addressed by the present study are as follows:

Research Question 1: How do Saudi scholars adapt to their home culture?
Research Question 2: How do the Saudi scholars readjust and reconnect to their workplace in the higher education sector after completing their doctoral scholarship abroad?

Participants

The study randomly recruited six participants, among all returnee assistant professors in the higher education sector, at three different Saudi universities. All of the recruited participants provided consent and agreed to take part in the study. However, no incentives were provided to the participants to take part in the study. Information about the participants was collected from the universities’ offices. Saudi students were sent on scholarships for five to eight academic years. They were not alone but had their families with them. Later, their readjustment to their countries was a multidimensional experience with layers of meaning and reflections on events and changes.

Three of them were female—Aliya, Iesha, and Fatemah—while the other three were male—Adam, Danyal, and Faaziz. Confidentiality was a major issue in this research, as the topic was deemed sensitive and potentially controversial among Saudi academics. Therefore, the names of the universities were kept anonymous and the participants were given pseudonyms for publication. Some were interviewed outside their universities in a place of their preference, whereas others were interviewed on the universities’ grounds. All the participants had spent from 5 to 8 years studying abroad, in Europe, Australia, or the United States.

Study Procedure

Each participant was interviewed in a semi-structured in-depth session that lasted from 30 to 50 min. This provided the participants with the opportunity to freely discuss what was important to them rather than limiting their responses to certain identified areas based on the literature review. The interviews were conducted in Arabic to yield accurate results, as Arabic was the participants’ first language. Interview data were translated into English by one researcher and then translated back into Arabic to ensure consistency of meaning. The meaning of participants’ experiences was revealed by examining their various cultural contexts and situations, which in turn helped in exploring their visions as they reentered their home culture. The reflection focused on their adaptation to their home culture and work contexts.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, this study has used thematic analysis. Data were analyzed and interpreted to report patterns that would describe the phenomena under study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis allowed to not only describe the phenomena but also to consider why participants behaved the way that they did. In this research, four prominent themes occurred in the data: emotional adaptation to their home culture, adaptation to their work in their home culture, adaptation of their families to home culture, and reentry coping mechanisms.

Results

The interviews with the six scholars provided the main idea that the return to Saudi Arabia was a challenging experience for them. Despite the duration of their stay, whether they had returned just months ago or several years back, the stories of the returned scholars were similar to each sharing a similar experience.

Emotional Adaptation to a Home Culture: “I Feel Less Excited Now”

Initially, the returned scholars expressed their excitement to return to their home country and shared the new experience and advanced teaching procedure. Aliya stated,
Initially, I felt very happy and excited to return. I was happy that I finished my thesis. My expectations were very high, but then my expectations started to minimize and get smaller, a lot of things in the college were not as I first expected.

Similar thoughts were echoed by Iesha and Fatemah, who stated, “I must admit I wasn’t looking forward to being back working among this type of bureaucratic system that could not help me convey and share my ideas.” Male participants in the study also shared similar stories; for instance, Adam expressed, “Honestly speaking, you come back with big expectations having to be away for six years, experiencing a different culture in an advanced country such as the UK.” Faaiz felt less excited: “I was happy and enthusiastic about returning. I had ideas and plans to share but no one would listen to me.”

They were surprised upon their return by the lack of assistance or guidance, such as for their work lives. All the participants reported feelings of irritation and depression. In more detail, responses revealed that upon the participants’ return to work, they were simply asked to start teaching, without any orientation or support, for instance, to find their classes and teach from the first week back at work. Faaiz explained, “I was expecting that things would be good upon my return, however, I did not get to see what I expected, to be honest, and it was the opposite.” Iesha said that she felt startled when asked to teach from the first week and could not figure out which book to use in the classroom:

I was surprised when I received my schedule because I did not know which book I was supposed to teach. No one explained to me the procedures and the way they were followed. There was no orientation, and no one cared how and what is being taught.

Similar thoughts were expressed by Aliya, who believed that orientation could have been helpful by simplifying its procedures: “The University could have arranged and held meetings, workshops, and orientations during the whole year, but nothing was offered.”

In partial contrast to the female, male participants received a warm welcome upon their return. They were hugged and congratulated during their return initially; however, afterward, they were not received well when faced they needed help. According to Danyal, he remembered how he was welcomed, but then when he sought assistance, there was no response: “I thought with all the warm greetings that I would be offered help if I needed it, but unfortunately, I wasn’t.” Adam said that his manager welcomed him, but then found that his promotion paperwork that should have been processed by the academic affair’s unit was not finished and he should do it, he says: “[y]ou have to do things by yourself and that is an issue. I was surprised to see that I am the one who has to do everything.” He added, “[t]o be honest, there was no help which was provided to us in an effort for the transitional programs.” It appeared from the responses that the degree of excitement was very high when they first arrived and then it continued to decline among all the participants.

Adaptation to Their Work in Their Home Culture: “We Are Losing Out”

All six participants noticed dramatic changes that had occurred in their perspective faculties. In the beginning, they were surprised by the increased number of staff and students and found that the curriculum and teaching practices were no longer the same. The curriculum was new and the teaching practices were structured following international standards. Not all participants were happy with these changes, and some expressed their concerns about the content and teaching practices in their colleges. Fatemah, for example, “I have been here for few months only, and I already feel tired . . . to be honest I feel shocked by everything.” She also expressed her worry that the newly adopted reform failed to meet her students’ needs. She was afraid that “because of the new teaching system that is based on international standards . . . We are losing out.” This sense of worry was also shared by Iesha: “I feel bad. Honestly, things are heading to the worse. I mean the way teaching and learning are conducted.” She reflected, “there were some students who complained that the teaching approach I am using is not effective since their prime focus is to pass the course.”

Danyal was frustrated with the changes in his workplace. He believed that change occurred only on the surface, by which he meant curriculum and teaching practices, while the mentality in terms of operating and managing the faculty was still the same. He also quoted his experience that his frustration might also be due to the culture shock; explaining his reason, he described, “Even though there are many positive changes with the new administration, still things are done randomly. My promotion was a struggle because of the bureaucracy procedures.” Faaiz also shared similar observations, as he felt powerless and found it challenging to break up what he called “the existing cultural institution.” He noticed that there was “a gap and conflict” between those working in the university and the newcomers or returnees, where each “has its agenda” and plans that they want to see on the ground. He explained this nature of gap and conflict:

This is the university’s policy that did not consider that their academics have returned from their scholarship with new ideas and that there will be a conflict between the young and elderly. Until now, the university does not recognize this gap.

Faaiz found himself lost and could not get his thought and ideas across to his colleagues. After a year, a new manager was assigned and Faaiz was able to share his ideas: “after a while, another man, close to my age took the position. I was able to communicate my ideas and things got slightly better.”
In contrast, Adam had an optimistic and positive view of change. He believed that the faculty members have changed in a good way and with time, as he says, “I am happy to see we are progressing to a new era. Though the change is slow and gradual, it surely is to stay.” He owed this positive change to the new leadership in the faculty that he described as being young and specialists in the field.

**Adaptation of Families to a Home Culture: “I Started Suffering”**

Participants suffered from financial instability and found it challenging to cope with their home culture again. Feelings of frustration and powerlessness made participants think of their lives back in the host countries and comparing how they used to live and how they were living at the present. Aliya, Iesha, Adam, and Faaiz expressed their frustration with their financial status. The standard salary for an assistant professor plus the allowances is around US$5,333. Iesha found that her financial status reflected on her work: “I found it very difficult to find a suitable house and pay the rent. This was financially exhausting. I was overwhelmed and had many thoughts were ongoing in my mind. I was distracted and could not focus on teaching.” Aliya too was not in a better position. She revealed how difficult it was to find suitable accommodation: “I cannot be divided into pieces, but I feel my head is full of thoughts and always thinking of how to manage transportation, accommodation, all these things have an impact on the way I perform inside the classroom.” She also commented on driving in Saudi Arabia: “Transportation is a challenge for all people whether they working or not, and I do not think that allowing women to drive will solve the problem, no, it will make it worse.” Aliya explained that the roads are overcrowded and therefore always arrives late, and with women driving, roads may get worse.

The position of male participants was like that of the female ones. Adam and Faaiz were dissatisfied with their income and their financial status. Adam was faced with a bureaucratic setup and felt the limited access to suitable accommodation:

Still we have not got an accommodation, yet you heard about the villas the university provides for the teaching staff, and there is a fight over it. This [is] the issue again bureaucratic. Still, we are not settled. I am still staying with my parents until I find a place to move in soon hopefully.

He sadly described his situation:

You come, and you have spent everything you are back with no savings in your bank account, and you have to wait for a couple of months to learn the way for reaching the level where you can financially survive.

Faaiz was disappointed with the pay structure and found it insufficient to meet his family’s needs. He mocked about how people thought he earned a high income after earning a doctorate degree: When you come from a scholarship everybody expects that you registered your kids in the best schools and you lived in the best district. There is a financial expectation from others. One of my relatives was shocked when he found how much I was earning because it was not much. He couldn’t believe it; he said this is impossible because I am a professor.

The statements and the responses from the participants made it apparent that the reverse culture shock was not only experienced by the respondents but also by their families as well as work. Iesha and Aliya were heartbroken and expressed their worries that their children would not cope with the Saudi way of life. In a distressed manner, Aliya said, “at the beginning, the settlement was an issue. I came back after seven years, and I found no house nothing and my children faced culture shock.” Iesha also was feeling weak-hearted that her children, who left Saudi Arabia when they were at the age of 4 and 3 and now are 14 and 12, were suffering from culture shock: “My children were suffering from the new conditions at school and could not adapt to the environment in the country.” She suffered from worry about the future of her children and was feeling mentally exhausted. She then gasped and remembered her life back in her host country:

You can’t share your thoughts with anyone here, and there are no support units like overseas where I used to find support and speak out my thoughts in a confidential manner. I don’t find this here. I don’t think I belong here.

The researchers asked the participants about their feelings and whether they received support upon their return to their home country in response to the transformational learning theory of frustration and agitation. They explained that they had a difficult time adjusting to their country and generally felt as if they were alone. Iesha said,

I felt mental exhaustion; I was also experiencing insomnia and depression, which took a toll on my physical health. I cannot recall that my manager met me or even held a meeting welcoming us when we were back. It was depressing, and I do not like to think of it anymore.

They revealed that working conditions were not always appealing, nor were they up to their standards. They were surprised upon their return as they were not offered any assistance or even guidance, even for their assigned duties at work.

**Reentry Coping Mechanisms: “I Have a System That When I Travel, I Remove the Saudi Memory and Replace It With the American One”**

Participants were all aware that their personalities and their practices as academic researchers and language educators had changed. However, they all emphasized different aspects of transformations. Broadly, they identified two levels of transformations, one related to personal skills required to cope with work demands and the other to knowledge and
professional competencies. Fatemah and Iesha focused more on knowledge and professional development in teaching and research as the changes in their perceptions and ideas became more open-minded and more inclusive toward other cultures and cultural differences. Confidently, Fatemah described herself as being “more knowledgeable obviously about my field. I am more open-minded to opinions, perceptions, and ideas. Nothing is black and white, and I guess research makes you humble. You realize that you can never know enough.” Iesha was proud that she had now become an expert in her field. She spoke with pride:

Now I am an assistant professor; this means that I finished two degrees, MA and PhD. During my time studying abroad, I learned theory and practice in teaching as well as research. This empowered me with the skills required to function in my workplace.

Both women highlighted that they felt stressed readjusting to the environment in their country. Unlike Fatemah and Iesha, Adam and Danyal developed their strategy to easily readjust to their home environment. Adam explained that

When I come back from abroad, I need to readjust. To solve this, I use an on and off memory switch. So, if I was in the UK, I use the English memory and here I use the Saudi memory.

Danyal shared the same strategy:

I have a system that when I travel, I remove the Saudi memory and replace it with the American one so I can integrate with them. People here have their way of dealing with things, and I don’t try to change them, because it is difficult to change people. At the same time, I have my own personality that I try to integrate with each type of people.

Danyal and Aliya emphasized that patience was a virtue they found very useful, especially after they returned from abroad, and it became a requirement to survive and cope with workplace demands such as following the new structured system of teaching, publication, and teaching for long hours. Aliya identified being patient as a trait she learned abroad to help her cope with her academic demands: “I became more patient; this was a result of my life experience abroad.” Danyal found patience a necessity in his current “bureaucratic context,” he says, “you need to be patient.” Faaziz also found patience useful when he attended meetings, as he listened before speaking and thought twice before expressing his opinion:

I am a very clear person, and I speak my mind. This does not always work in this context. Some people like to talk about others. I am very careful now in how I deal with colleagues especially the new ones.

He also revealed that he was now more careful when it came to making decisions and became less enthusiastic about new ideas:

There are many people who suggest many things and want them to be executed straight away, and this is not right. There are regulations and procedures and studies that need to be conducted first. There is the culture of administration that the academic faculty are unaware of.

It is observed that the host country’s cultural values, to a great extent, are absorbed in the participants, which affected their preadaptation to their home culture.

Discussion

The present study has investigated how Saudi PhD scholars experienced revered culture shock in their workplace after finishing their studies abroad. Four main themes emerged from the data: emotional adaptation to their home culture: “I feel less excited now”; adaptation to their work in their home culture: “We are losing out”; the adaptation of families to their home culture: “I started suffering”; and reentry coping mechanisms: “I have a system that when I travel, I remove the Saudi memory and replace it with the American one.”

Kartoshkina (2015) stated that although returnees may face challenges related to reverse culture shock, they still generally feel happy about returning home and can find ways to readjust to their home culture. However, this may not be the case in the present study, as Saudi Arabia is so different in many aspects from the United States and other Western countries. This study explained how Saudi students who had lived for 5 to 8 years abroad were able to cope and readjust to their home country. This study is the only one of its kind, that is, the only one to examine this phenomenon, and the results should inform the improvement of services for these scholars. The study included participants who went abroad from 2004 to 2018, a period when more than a million Saudi students (both male and female) were sent abroad to finish their academic studies.

The first theme explained what the participants thought of the changes upon their return to their old workplace. They are expected to work at their universities when they return because the scholarship was paid by their workplaces and therefore are obligated to this condition. In the beginning, participants held high expectations and were enthusiastic and excited about the return to their home country. They had earned PhDs and were proud of their achievements and enthusiastic about implementing their learning at home. However, this did not resonate long as they started to experience early signs of reverse culture shock. They felt were unwelcomed and found that they were asked to teach from the first week without orientation or a welcome meeting. Things were complicated when they found that all the paperwork should have been completed by the admin staff but instead was finished by them. They were left alone to figure out what to do. At the end of this stage, they were less excited about their return to Saudi Arabia, their home.
At the workplace, they felt that they were losing out on what they learned and know about how teaching should be conducted. They were surprised by the changes that had occurred in their workplace. The buildings were new and so were the administrative staff. They were surprised to find that the teaching practices were structured and standardized. This means that they could not apply different teaching approaches and were restricted to certain teaching practices that reflect the main learning outcomes constructed by their faculty’s board members. The responses of participants described these changes as insignificant and ineffective with their students whose needs are left unmet.

The returnees had to face the rigidity of bureaucracy when discussing new ideas with their superiors. They found that the existing culture at work was hard to breakthrough. This was due to the gap and conflict between different generations, with each having their own agenda. On the contrary, there were a few voices that were optimistic by the current leadership and believed that with young leadership personalities, they would be heading to a new era.

In the third theme, the feelings of reverse culture shock were escalated and reached a peak point. Participants expressed disappointment with the way they were received when they first arrived at their workplace. They were not provided support or guidance to help them readjust and settle in their workplace. They were frustrated with their financial status and could not cope with financial demands such as school fees and house rent. It was difficult to find suitable schools for their children who were not coping with the Saudi culture. Housing was a major issue with most participants because they were looking for houses while at the same time meeting their academic workload demands. They hoped that the university could have provided assistance to find suitable housing and schools for their children. They wanted to see change and reform but no one would listen. All in all, some of them were suffering mentally and physically and yet could not share emotional distress with anyone in the faculty. They looked back at their lives abroad and appreciated the emotional support they used to receive. Such feelings led some of them to feel disconnected and not belonging to their home, Saudi Arabia and in particular their respective faculties. They felt disappointed and distressed.

Finally, participants reflected on the coping strategies that were developed to help them readjust. They derived such strategies from their academic and personal experience abroad. Female participants were proud and satisfied with the personalities they had developed through their life abroad and the knowledge they had gained. They became open-minded to new ideas and more inclusive to other cultures. Male participants pointed out that they developed their strategy that is the switch on and off memory, so when they are in Saudi Arabia, they insert the Saudi memory, and when abroad, they insert whatever memory suit that country, in the case of this research, the U.S. and U.K. memories. They also emphasized being patient as a vital strategy to cope. Finally, they stated that they learn now when to speak and when to give their opinions. At this stage, it can be claimed that the participants learned how to cope and were settled in their home country.

These findings are in agreement with those reviewed in the literature (Acker, 2015; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). Participants in this study were dissatisfied with the absence of support, their financial status, and the way their children were coping with life in their country. These feelings of distress and disappointment caused internal conflict, as described by Christofi and Thompson (2007). Their participants were disappointed with the difficult life in their home country, which was summed up in the absence of liberated life, differences between social interactions, work, and relationships in their host countries and in their home countries. They compared it with what they called “a comfortable lifestyle” in the host country. Similarly, participants in this study seemed to find it difficult to accept the changes that had occurred in their teaching context, describing them as ineffective and meaningless. However, the changes in their personalities had been positive. Saudi scholars were aware of their academic and personal changes. They revealed that they became open-minded and more inclusive to other cultures than before leaving abroad. They were organized and planned for the future and focused on their personal and academic goals. Gu and Schweisfurth (2015) reported similar results while examining the experiences of Chinese returnees living abroad, and concluded that this experience was a valuable turning point that transformed their lives on both personal and academic levels.

Experiences also differ based on gender, as highlighted in this study. Acker (2015) connected this experience to gender organizational theory, which is inclusive of the different patterns associated with daily work and personal life. The experiences of the participants differed concerning readjustments and reconnection. Female participants seemed more resistant to changes in their context and could not accept them without suffering. They were mentally and physically distressed to readjust with their families in Saudi society. This is consistent with Gaw (2002), who found a high level of reverse culture shock in returnees, like the female participants in this study who expressed high levels of internal conflict during readjustment, such as loneliness, depression, and anxiety. They were used to a lifestyle that was available abroad but not found at home, as also mentioned by Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern (2015), who mentioned that Saudi women in the United States experienced free mobility and independence: Their adaptation to the lifestyle of the United States was a more comfortable and less bitter experience than the one Saudi female participant experienced to readjust and reconnect to their own country. In contrast, male participants developed an interesting strategy to reconnect and readjust with their context: They switched on and off the so-called “the Saudi memory” in Saudi Arabia and host countries respectively.
The findings of the study yielded some practical implications, which could be adopted to reduce reverse culture shock among Saudi scholars. First, the scholars must gain a comprehensive understanding of the expectations held of them by their institutions before returning to their home country. All necessary information should be collected from the institute’s administration to help them prepare for potential reverse culture shock. This information can also assist in their acceptance of the home culture and readaptation to it.

Conclusion

The study has discussed how six participants, Saudi scholars returning home after completing PhDs abroad, readjusted to their academic and culture and working context. These individuals had lived in Western countries for at least 7 years and had experienced modern life in realms, including education, health care, and public transportation. Upon returning, they found themselves with minimal means of moving toward prosperity facing challenges in areas such as education for their children, accommodation, and transportation. They were expecting support and appreciation; however, what they experienced, in reality, was financial obstacles and ignorance from their peers and superiors. Because international school fees were high, they were unable to offer their children the same standard of education as they had received in their host country. They refused to accept the changes they saw, and they were unhappy and felt unwelcomed. All these factors created a feeling of anger with their living conditions.

It was concluded that this study can be of great use in preparing and organizing programs that could assist Saudi new returnees to readjust and reconnect with their context again. The results provided useful information to help universities prioritize their staff’s well-being and design rehabilitative courses for new returnees to help them integrate again in their workplace.

Recommendations and Future Studies

The study recommends that Saudi institutions conduct orientations for returnees to develop their basic understanding of the practices and procedures followed in the institute. Such an orientation should highlight the difference in the guidelines and policies which occurred while they were in the host country. Also, time needs to be allotted to returnees for them to settle both financially and mentally, for their own sake and that of their families. Furthermore, future studies are needed to evaluate the Saudi scholars’ experience abroad. The findings will assist in the development of effective policies and in bridging the gap between the current findings and the previous research to meet their needs effectively, such as what practices and approaches are adopted in the host country institutes for facilitating the scholars, and how they differ from the ones prevailing in the home country. Accordingly, the environmental cultural aspects and impact of the socio-cultural system can be expanded. The impact on the female scholars only can be evaluated as women scholars in this study were unable to develop the Saudi memory on-and-off mechanism.

There are certain limitations in the present study, for instance, both researchers were also professors in higher education in Saudi Arabia and so participants did not always articulate their thoughts fully, presuming that the interviewers were likely to know what they were talking about. Also, the participants may have a fear of speaking negatively about their workplace. The study concludes that job satisfaction for the returnees in the workplace is an essential factor that influences their working performance and sharing of learned concepts from abroad; this issue emerged in the interviews but went beyond the scope of this article, and thus could be discussed further in future research.

Acknowledgments

The author is very thankful to all the associated personnel in any reference that contributed to the purpose of this research.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Miriam Alkubaidi
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5205-5586

References

Acker, J. (2015). Gendering organizational theory. In J. M. Shafritz, J. S. Ott, & Y. S. Jang (Eds.), Classics of organization theory (8th ed., pp. 420–428). Wadsworth.
Almutairi, Y. M. (2018). The reentry experience of Saudi Scholars in a university of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and how their administrators perceive the reentry of Saudi Scholars [Doctoral dissertation]. University of Northern Colorado.
Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3, 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
Christofi, V., & Thompson, C. L. (2007). You cannot go home again: A phenomenological investigation of returning to the sojourn country after studying abroad. Journal of Counseling & Development, 85, 53–63. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2007.tb00444.x
Gaw, K. F. (2002). Reverse culture shock in students returning from overseas. International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 24, 83–104. https://doi.org/10.1016/s0147-1767(99)00024-3
Geel, A. (2016). Separate or together? Women-only public spaces and participation of Saudi women in the public domain in Saudi Arabia. *Contemporary Islam, 10*, 357–378.

Gu, Q., & Schweisfurth, M. (2015). Transnational connections, competences, and identities: Experiences of Chinese international students after their return “home.” *British Educational Research Journal, 41*, 947–970. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3175

Guba, E. G. (1990). The alternative paradigm dialogs. In E. C. Guba (Ed.), *The paradigm dialog* (pp. 17–27). Sage.

Kartoshkina, Y. (2015). Bitter-sweet re-entry after studying abroad. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 44*, 35–45. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2014.11.001

Le, A., & LaCost, B. (2017). Vietnamese graduate international student repatriates: Reverse adjustment. *Journal of International Students, 7*, 449–464. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v7i3.203

Lefdahl-Davis, E. M., & Perrone-McGovern, K. M. (2015). The cultural adjustment of Saudi women international students: A qualitative examination. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 46*, 406–434.

Merriam, S. B. (2006). Transformational learning and HIV-positive young adults. *Theoretical Frameworks in Qualitative Research, 1*, 23–38.

Mezirow, J. (2000). *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*. The Jossey-Bass higher and adult education series. ERIC.

Oberg, K. (1960). Cultural shock: Adjustment to new cultural environments. *Practical Anthropology, 7*, 177–182. https://doi.org/10.1177/009182966000700405

Saudi Arabia Ministry of Higher Education. (2016). *King Abdullah scholarships program*. https://www.moe.gov.sa/en/news/Pages/an74.aspx

Sarmistha, U. (2019). *Transnational immigrants: Redefining identity and citizenship*. Springer.

Sussman, N. M. (2002). Testing the cultural identity model of the cultural transition cycle: Sojourners return home. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 26*, 391–408. https://doi.org/10.1016/s0147-1767(02)00013-5

Taylor, E. W. (2017). Transformative learning theory. In A. Laros, T. Fuhr, & E. W. Taylor (Eds.), *Transformative learning meets bildung* (pp. 17–29). Brill Sense.

Tisdell, E. J. (2003). *Exploring spirituality and culture in adult and higher education*. John Wiley.

Yakaboski, T., Perez-Velez, K., & Almutairi, Y. (2017). Breaking the silence: Saudi Graduate student experiences on a US campus. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 11*, 221–238.