Comparative and international educational research is interested in a world of unceasing change, and “challenges us to think broadly about the link between local practices and global issues and to explore the overlapping values and social systems that underpin the educational enterprise itself” (Hayhoe & Mundy, 2008, p. 1). Comparative Education really does come into its own in “analysing and demonstrating the contextual idioms which still add up to educational distinctiveness in any one place or time. Comparative Education is paramount in demonstrating and assessing the dynamic of change brought about by the interplay of technological and cultural development with existing educational practices and assumptions” (King, 1965, p. 159).

It has also been argued that comparative adult education changes, educates, and transforms the person undertaking the comparison in addition to informing the reading audience. More clearly, intercultural experience and discourse transform attitudes and values, leading to a greater mutual understanding of differing ways of life and learning, reducing the fear of the strange (Reischmann, 2008). “These changes go beyond ‘knowing’ and ‘using’ and include a basic personal transformation: The international-comparative perspective assists to overcome one’s own ethnocentric blindness (p. 22).” In light of the purposes of comparative and international research, the aim of this paper’s authors was to leverage systematic inquiry into personal experience and competing cultural perspectives as a window to view the micro and macro-level cultural differences between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United States, rendering them both more and less “strange” to one another.

Since September 11, 2001, the perceived dichotomy between the Islamic East and the West has seized westerners’ collective imagination. Some strands of conversation in the West about gender and Islam are appropriately nuanced and shed light on the diversity of experiences and practices within Eastern cultures, while many other depictions are much less sanguine. Many Western interpretations of Eastern cultures are approached from a position of “intellectual privilege”, capitalizing on Western cultural sensibilities in order to promote political and ideological images of Eastern cultures for Western purposes and gain. A comparative approach between Eastern and Western...
cultures must be approached with great caution, as Marcuse (1965) warns us of repressive tolerance, and the risks we run of reinforcing preconceptions and stereotypes, and unwittingly reinforcing privilege and hegemony when presenting “diverse perspectives” as a mere token of “inclusion”. The authors of this paper do not take this challenge lightly, prudently proceeding in hopes of not reinforcing Western, privileged perceptions of Saudi Arabian culture, but rather challenging them at both micro and macro levels.

**Background**

Saudi Arabia was declared a unified Kingdom in 1932 by Abdel Aziz ben Saud. As the custodian of Mecca and Medina and Islam’s holy book The Qur’an, Saudi Arabia as a country is considered the “keeper” of Islam as a religion, a great responsibility in preserving the Muslim faith. Basic law of government and education are centered on Islam, with the purpose of conserving a society and culture of faith. In its early years, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was a relatively weak economically until the discovery of oil in the 1930s and the oil boom of the 1970s. With this boom came the development of housing, schools, and universities, and the transformation of Saudi Arabian society. Presently, Saudi Arabia is one of the richest countries in the world and a major political and economic influence which has ushered in a great amount of social change. The education system in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has also been under great reform for the past 60 years. Public schools were established in the 1930s, but it was not until 1951 that an extensive program of publicly funded secondary schools was initiated. In 1961, education for females was mandated, and by 1963 girls’ education was available at both the intermediate and secondary levels. The first university, known as King Saud University, was founded in Riyadh in 1957, and was the first university in the Arabian Gulf region. Within a very short time span, 7 universities and 78 colleges were established. A national organization for technical and vocational training was created in 1980, to accommodate the kingdom’s increasing needs for specialized technical training. The number of Saudi students who studied abroad was very high until the early 1980s, when scholarships were curtailed, but as of 2005, Saudi Arabia has newly begun to support students with scholarships to study abroad, and through this program, thousands of men and women have earned doctorates in Western universities. From the early 1980s onward, education has expanded rapidly at all levels in the country. Saudi education must be understood within this context of rapid expansion and modernization. It is suggested (Onsman, 2011) that more than 13 billion dollars are invested in education a year, and more than two billion are spent annually on higher education. The goal is to develop a competitive education system and to lead educational development in the region. Education in Saudi Arabia is the quintessential picture of globalization processes meeting local social structures, cultures, and beliefs.

Saudi education programs embody Shari’a, and the purpose of education is to instill a particular vision of the moral and religious life in Saudi society. One of the distinctive characteristics of education in Saudi Arabia is the separation of male and female education, where the system treats the sexes differently based on their different societal social expectations. While this is often critiqued in the West, gendered and religious practices have also historically informed Western education systems, and even presently inform how men and women have been/are educated and trained. It is these two major differences in educational systems, the separation of male and female students and faith-centered curriculum, which also serve as the primary social dimensions that influence individual experience for Saudi students, both male and female, who are enrolled in US institutions of education. It is at the intersections of the expansion of Saudi education, Saudi student mobility, and the personal experiences of Saudi students in the West where this paper begins.

**Methods**

In this paper, the authors provide a brief summary of an autoethnographic project that was completed in the spring of 2012. The interactions between the self and others in a culture, and the interactions between an individual identity and various cultures, serve as the foci of autoethnographic research: the autoethnographer is interested in the spaces between individuals and the cultures in which they participate, and the tensions created in between (Muncey, 2010). The *auto* in autoethnography takes up the personal views and experiences of individuals, while *ethnography* takes up the facets and dimensions of collectively defined identities, or cultures. “From this individual’s point of view, self is the starting point for cultural acquisition and transmission” (Chang, 2008, p. 23), and the individual becomes the basic unit of culture, intercultural experience, and comparison—a natural starting point for building international and comparative perspectives. Autoethnography links two common approaches in comparative research (Reischmann, 2008), sojourners’ narratives of intercultural experiences, and the more systematic descriptions and comparisons of cultures, relating and theorizing the two in relationship. This methodological approach seeks to describe and methodically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience in comparison (Ellis, 2000, 2004).

The application of autoethnography as the methodological framework for this research rests on four foundational assumptions (Chang, 2008): “(1) culture is a group oriented concept by which self is always connected with others; (2) the reading and writing of self-narratives provides a window through which self and others can be examined and understood; (3) telling one’s story does not automatically result in the cultural understanding of self and others, which only grows out of in-depth cultural analysis and interpretation; and (4)
autoethnography is an excellent instructional tool to help not only social scientists but also practitioners... gain profound understanding of self and others and function more effectively with others from diverse cultural backgrounds” (p. 13). Autoethnography, then, offers a systematic and rigorous method of self-inquiry that can shed light on personal experience as well as broader cultural similarities and differences.

Conceptual Framework

Talk about Islamic East-West relations at points of cultural juncture is often framed with regard to the Islamic belief structure, or with the gender oriented social organization of society. The purpose of this paper is not to discuss Islam and Saudi Arabian gender norms from a Western point of view, nor to reinforce Western preconceived notions of Islamic culture. *Kyriarchy* (Schüssler Fiorenza, 2009) is a term that describes the intersectionality of dimensions of identity as they are experienced by any person, where in some contexts the person may be advantaged, and in other contexts disadvantaged. Schüssler Fiorenza (2009) discusses how different dimensions of identity become nodal points of experience, through which other dimensions of identity are also experienced. These nodal points of identity then inform identity and experience, and one can assume that these nodes also shift and are experienced differently when a person moves to another culture. Upon entry and participation in another culture, the primary nodes of experience may shift. For example, in Saudi Arabia, being male may be the nodal point of experience through which the other identity dimensions are also experienced, but upon moving to the US, the primary node of identity and experience may change to one’s faith, as that perhaps becomes the node that most dominantly influences the experience of the other dimensions. For a Saudi woman, the node of gender may be the primary node through which identity is experienced at home, but even if gender remains the primary node of experience in the US, the position of being a woman of color and a Muslim in a US American context necessitates shifts in how a person sees and understands herself.

Based on the outlined methods of autoethnography, and the notion of kyriarchy, two stories of Saudi Arabian students are shared in this paper. Sarah’s story is told through the identity dimension of gender and her accompanying transformations, and Obaid’s story is told through the identity dimension of his faith, and how this has impacted his learning experience. The authors employ pieces of narrative from personal experiences in both the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United States to highlight the tensions between the two cultures as experienced by individuals, as well as to explore the transformative benefits of gained cultural and linguistic knowledge in comparison. Through the telling of individual stories, the authors present a broad brush stroke picture of some divergences between cultures and educational purposes. And finally, the methodological approach of autoethnography is briefly discussed as a tool for comparative research in the field of adult education.

Illuminating Narratives

Gender: Sarah’s Experience

My experience of going abroad to the US for my studies, both prior to and following my departure, has been informed by my gender. As I was completing my Master’s degree in Education, my parents supported me and my goal to study abroad in the United States, and they encouraged me to enter the initial process for a state sponsored scholarship. While I was in this process, we began receiving many email messages from my relatives, friends, and neighbors. One of my friends wrote: “Studying abroad alone is difficult for a male, so it would be so hard for you. Listen to me, and forget this idea. Because you are here, you do not understand my words. Please, listen to me and forget this idea. I love you and do not want to see you suffer.” Sarah! Sarah! Are you serious? Or you are just kidding us?” exclaimed on of my relatives in a phone message when she heard I had decided to study abroad. Their comments and concerns made me question myself and my dreams, and I wondered if something was wrong with me. I felt confused as I experienced the tension between my dreams and my family’s and friends’ opinions.

My parents also had bitter conversations with some of our relatives. I can recall one of my relatives saying, “if you are good parents, you should protect your daughter”! There were some dialogues which I could not get out of my mind, such as the part of an argument between my father and my uncle. My uncle: “Your daughter cannot stand alone; because everything she wants we do it for her, so she cannot take up the responsibility of doing everything for herself.” My father: “You do not perfectly know her.” My uncle: “However, she will face a different culture and custom, so people may not accept her as a Muslim woman.” At the last statement, I could not bear to listen to the rest of the conversation, and I became wrought with worry. However, there were friends who also supported me. One friend wrote, “I know you, Sarah. You can do it, and this is your dream. Therefore, do not listen to anyone else, just keep going!” My siblings also supported me. My brother said to me, “You want to improve yourself, you want to become a doctor, you want to improve the Saudi family’s and friends’ opinions.” My siblings also supported me. My brother said to me, “You want to improve yourself, you want to become a doctor, you want to improve the Saudi educational systems, so you should follow your dream. You are capable of doing anything on your own”.

When the flight attendant announced, “Now, we are in the U.S,” I felt like I wanted to return back to my country, because I did not know where I was going, and could not speak English. When I arrived at the Washington airport, I just followed people and used sign language and a few words. After I had arrived to the town and lived by myself in an apartment, I faced a lot of difficulties which...
included struggling with English, feeling lonely and homesick, finding an appropriate food, and changing my identity.

My first experiences were characterized with feelings of disappointment and frustration. Even when I had the chance to spend time with Americans, I did not understand them or their customs. They were very kind, but I was sad and wanted to cry because I did not understand them. It was difficult in the beginning, I was never comfortable, and people did not understand me. I avoided going places, because I knew I could not explain myself or what I needed. I only ate fast food, because I could not find any food to my liking. I often went to the store, only to come home empty handed and disappointed.

After several months, I felt even more lonely and homesick, especially during the holidays like Thanksgiving and Spring Break, or when I received emails or phone messages from my family. In my journals, I wrote some simple feelings:

When the moon is full and its light is vivid
When the stars communicate with each other
I feel that I need someone who can listen to me
I need someone who understands me
Then the stars send to my heart a hidden ray
and say we are here, we are with you
So I realize that I would find this person who I was looking for
I know as well as looking about me
Be close

It was during these breaks where I felt the most alone and isolated. Sometimes my family sent me messages like, “Right now, our parents and siblings are sitting in your room and we are talking about you. We also are drinking the coffee which you like and watching television. We just miss and love you. Take care.” Sometimes I felt as though I could not stand being apart from my family any longer.

But I also grew with my experience. At home, I had not been responsible for many things and had never paid an electricity bill, water bill, or for rent, because my family had always taken care of things. But when I came to the United States, I had to do much more than that, which helped me become more confident in myself and discover my own value. For example, in the English center, I helped new international students find and understand what they needed. Sometimes the school asked me to translate for Arabic students or employees and to help them to correctly understand each other. I also showed students where they could find appropriate food. With both international and Arabic students, I showed them some important places such as the health center, bus stop (and explained the schedule), and library, and sometimes I described my experience of learning English and shared my strategies for studying.

Even though I had learned many new things, I sometimes asked myself who I am, especially after I was in contact with my friends or family. I used many English words while I was communicating with them, and my language seemed confused. Also, when I returned to my country (especially the first visit), many people who know me told me that “you seem like American people.” I continuously caught myself “acting like an American” and didn’t know where I belonged exactly. However, I felt extremely proud when my family told me that there were some girls in my area who are also studying abroad because I have opened the door for them. To clarify, through my decision to study abroad, I believed that I had a different perspective which might lead me to achieve a big goal, and I have overcome many obstacles in order to follow my dream. I believe this experience has transformed me. I did what women traditionally do not do, such as stating that my dream to study abroad was bigger than other people’s emotions, desires, and customs. This is similar to what Mezirow (2000) mentioned about transformative learning as changing a frame of reference, which is inclusive of two dimensions: a habit of mind and resulting points of view. As I renegotiated my worlds and social expectations, integrating my new selves while parting with and letting go of some old selves, I learned to see and understand myself in new ways.

In taking on the responsibilities that came with my studies in the US, I became a Muslim woman who can navigate in two worlds. I have grown beyond my social expectations at home, and have influenced other women, and I continue to grow and change as my experience of dual cultures deepens. I understand my culture in a more profound way, as I see it through different eyes, but I also understand this new culture in ways I could not see in the beginning. Being a Muslim woman has informed all of these experiences, as have the expectations others have of me as a Muslim woman, both in Saudi Arabia and the US. I believe I have challenged these gendered social expectations, both individually and socially. I am not a woman confined by my gender, but rather an empowered woman who is redefining my understandings of my gender through multiple lenses and experiences. This is my transformation.

Faith: Obaid’s Experience

When I decided to pursue my studies in the in the United States, I still remember my brother’s advice, “If you have to be motivated and willing to change, go, otherwise you should stay.” When I came to United States for the first time, it was very hard for me because I did not speak the English language; also, the culture and lifestyle were different from my country. A month, after arriving in the United States, I wrote in my journal, “Next month, I will go back to my country and never come back.” When I decided to return to my country, I was puzzled because people in my culture considered my return to be a failure. At that time, I felt more than just pain. I stayed.

The power of language is probably the most effective way of reducing or eliminating the feeling of alienation as well as the negative impact of culture
Used to love to study and like to learn, but limitations with the English language made me feel shy and make people regard me as a shy person. After several months, I began communicating with people around me. I spent time with American people and started to learn about the United States culture. One day, one of them said to me, “Obaid, I thought you were a shy person but you are not!”

After some months of studying in an English program, my language was getting better. I could communicate with people around me, and I was getting to know some friends. I was studying very hard and my teachers encouraged me. They told me each semester, that “Obaid you learn very fast.” I did not participate much in class, and my teachers wondered about that. They did not know the reason, but I did. In Saudi Arabia students normally do not talk very much in the classroom. In general, students just listen, and the teachers say everything. This classroom expectation was a major change for me, and I still struggle with the American expectation to voice one’s opinions and beliefs.

Our educational system in Saudi Arabia, in particular, and the Arab countries in general, relies on studies in faith and mobilization of memory, which limits creative thinking. For example, in the first semester of my language learning, a teacher asked students to read a short story. I memorized the whole story, and I was feeling great about it. The next day the teacher asked the students to write one or two paragraphs about the story. My two paragraphs were exact copies of the story. The next day the teacher accused me of cheating. He asked me to write the two paragraphs again in front of him. When I did, he laughed and told me that in the United States the system considers what I did as cheating. At that time I realized I can no longer simply recite text, and that I should change my learning patterns, so I could learn more effectively. I sent to my brother an email, he was in high school at the time, and I told him please not to rely only on rote memorization.

The education system in the United States also seems very flexible. For example, in the first semester of my language learning, a teacher asked students to read a short story. I memorized the whole story, and I was feeling great about it. The next day the teacher asked the students to write one or two paragraphs about the story. My two paragraphs were exact copies of the story. The next day the teacher accused me of cheating. He asked me to write the two paragraphs again in front of him. When I did, he laughed and told me that in the United States the system considers what I did as cheating. At that time I realized I can no longer simply recite text, and that I should change my learning patterns, so I could learn more effectively. I sent to my brother an email, he was in high school at the time, and I told him please not to rely only on rote memorization.

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The second semester I was enrolled in my doctoral program was a big challenge in my education. In the Foundations of Educational Research class, I was initially lost, not because of the limit of my English language, but because of my beliefs. In my country, if you ask a person what they believe, he or she will say the faith Islam or the Holy Book. In this course, we studied many educational philosophies, such as pragmatism. In our culture, some of these philosophies conflict with our religion, from which our education stems. At the beginning of this course these philosophies did not make sense to me. I was wondering how these philosophies could possibly make sense to American students. In our education system we study some of these philosophers, but we do not believe much of the information on them, because some of them are contrary to our religion. When faced with these new philosophies, I sometimes felt like I had lost my identity and my spirit. At the end of the course, I realized the importance of these philosophies, and how they could guide us to effective teaching and research.

I consider my studying abroad in the United States to be a major turning point in my life that has opened my view. This shift is not only in the academic side, but also in the side of behavioral, social, and cultural influences. For example, after I started speaking the English language, my personality has changed; I have become a more social person and my learning has improved. I have adapted to the education system in the United States, and have tried to learn in creative ways and not just try to memorize everything. My view of things has become more accepting, for example of educational philosophies. In addition, I have adapted to many new situations, and am learning to negotiate my cultural identity within the context of Western education. According to Gu, Schweisfurth, and Day (2010), international students’ intercultural learning experiences are both transitional and transformational and necessitate identity change to a greater or lesser extent. Between Sarah’s experience as a Saudi woman and mine as a Saudi man, we attribute some similar changes such as psychology, behavior, and identity to these experiences, and recognize that they have been filtered through our gender and religious norms. However, we also
realize the challenges of negotiating competing ideas, beliefs, and social expectations, and wonder how these will continue to be transformed, for us personally, and within the evolving Saudi education system.

Analytical Summary
What do these examples mean for international comparison in general? These short stories highlight some of the differences between social and cultural expectations, and purposes for education. One of the major challenges in completing comparative educational scholarship between “Eastern” and “Western” cultures is the tendency to discuss another country’s sociocultural dimensions through Western understandings. While many of these social expectations and beliefs do differ greatly, it is very difficult to conduct comparative studies without falling into the trap of evaluating education systems by Western cultural sensibilities. As seen here, the Saudi education system is subject to global trends as much as any other country, and has been responding with rapid expansion and educational reform. The experiences of the Saudi student-authors of this paper serve as evidence of these. To critique each system according to Western “norms” is to commit a logical fallacy in some terms, not to mention Western education systems are themselves rapidly evolving and being reformed and may not be the gold standard either. This leads us to the questions of, when pursuing educational research in comparison, by whose standards, whose beliefs, which values, for what purposes, and to what end do we compare education systems?

While gender and faith were nodal dimensions of identity that informed both Sarah’s and Obaid’s experiences, they have found ways to learn and change in spite of the social expectations others have held of them (in both “Eastern” and “Western” cultures). Autoethnography offers the opportunity to explore macro level social customs and understandings through the eyes of individual experience. Methodologically, this allows us to see how shifts and changes simultaneously occur at both micro and macro levels, and how each level is influenced by the other in their flowing states of change. Global processes continue to contribute to the rapid evolution of education in Saudi Arabia, enabling student mobility and the opportunities for individuals to grow personally, which then feeds back into wider systemic changes. And as for the charge to international and comparative education researchers to challenge readers to “think broadly about the link between local practices and global issues and to explore the overlapping values and social systems that underpin the educational enterprise itself” (Hayhoe & Mundy, 2008, p. 1), we find the methodological approach of autoethnography very useful.

Resources