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Pulling-Strings: Narratives of Conflicting Identities from Saudi Novice English Language Professors

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Abstract
The present study explores the struggle led by academic novice English language professors against a robust hierarchical administrative system in a Saudi university. The study adopts a qualitative narrative approach. Data were collected in the form of narratives through interviews with six assistant professors who have availed of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program and recently returned to Saudi Arabia. Grounded theory was applied to analyze the data. Thematic analysis was performed to examine the data. The study results showed that the participants claimed that their relationships with colleagues were weak. They shared no interest and are different in sub-majors. Thus, participants found themselves isolated and disconnected. The study concludes that the views of Saudi academics need to be considered. In contrast, the university as an organization needs to be reshaped and restudied to meet the needs of its academic staff. The study's significance lies in filling the literature gap about how the Saudi professors perceive their identity after returning home and how they deal with the administrative challenges to cope with their working environment.

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Introduction

The Higher Education (HE) system of Saudi Arabia is one of the best-funded systems for developments in the Gulf Arab states (Koch, 2014). It has witnessed rapid changes in policy structure, and several universities have been founded around the country (Alamri, 2011). For instance, the government had only eight public universities in 2010, which rose to 25 universities in 2015 and 30 privately-owned universities (Abubakar et al., 2016). It also invested extensive funding and efforts toward internationalization, one of which included sending its staff abroad. In 2012-13 about 200,000 Saudi students were sent abroad to continue their higher education (Ahmed, 2015). The Ministry of Higher Education monitors and directs policies and practices adopted by different Saudi Arabian universities (Alamri, 2011). Each university's higher administrative council is responsible for hiring staff, devising policies, allocating funds, setting curricula, and supervising academic and administrative activities (Alkhazim, 2003). Therefore, the universities are being transformed to have more centralized administrations.

Under such conditions, there is a significant lack of information about the faculty member and administrative body regarding teachers' expectations and practices (Alzuman, 2015). Therefore, the present study verifies this assumption, reviews the different insights, and seeks information on alternate stances. It further aims to examine the coping strategies used by Saudi English language professors that affect their experience and academic identities. It also intends to indicate the role of six Saudi English language professors' as they adapt to their Saudi educational settings. It highlights their experience and the problems they encountered in Saudi higher education.

There is a gap in the current literature about how Saudi professors perceive their identity after returning home, how their university received them upon their return to Saudi Arabia, and how they deal with administrative challenges to cope with their working environment. To address this gap and answer the above questions, the study used academic identity to understand the strategies used by the Saudi professors to cope with the higher education context. Firstly, academic identity is elaborated, and the conception of coping strategies within a teaching context is explained. According to Norton (1997), identity refers to individuals' understanding of the surrounding world and knowing their potential for the future. In this study, our participants are a group of Saudi professors who experienced an academic identity shift by being individuals who spent time overseas. This may have impacted how they perceive their identity, potential, future possibilities, and coping with their working environment (Norton, 1997).

Moreover, it is evident in the literature that teachers drawback to their beliefs, needs, and preferences to build their paths (Mora, Trejo & Roux, 2014). Therefore, the study looks at how the values and beliefs that constitute their academic identity inform how they cope with the challenges and complexities found in their working environment. It is believed that the context and the way policies are constructed within any university structure would heavily influence academics' identity, relationships with colleagues, and the way they position themselves in such a context (Clegg, 2008). It became apparent that with a shift in higher education towards new structured practices such as managerial (Laiho et al., 2020), there may be a change in the way teaching staff to construct paths and strategies to adjust to these complex changes that may cause tension between their held beliefs and values and working environment demands (Arvaja, 2018).

The rapid and dynamic changes that are taking place in HE is bringing significant strains on how academics perceive themselves (Pick et al., 2017). For example, in the Saudi higher education sector, there is a strong movement in favor of the managerial structure of higher education practices to comply with the demands of accreditation and emphasize high-quality education (Darandari & Cardew, 2013), which means that there would be a violent escalation in the workload of Saudi teaching staff (Allui & Sahni, 2016) to ensure high levels of quality and accountability.

Furthermore, the education policies in Saudi Arabia are described as being top-down, and the institution-power is predominant, where a rigid hierarchy exists in the form of the policies and mandate norms (Elyas, 2011). Most of the literature discussed was more in personal context but did not explain how individuals perceive the influence of the context on their actions and thoughts (Beijaard et al., 2004). According to the authors, studying academic identity might promote an understanding of how teachers identify the quick changes that are taking place in the Saudi educational system, mainly when it is clear that these changes will not be able to meet the desires and expectations of the teachers (Beijaard et al., 2004). Thus, it is essential to know how those professors cope with changes and make sense of their experiences.

Research Questions

Based on the aim of this study, the following research questions have been formulated:

RQ1. How do Saudi Professors perceive their identity after returning home, and how do their university receive them upon returning to Saudi Arabia?

RQ2. How do the professors deal with administrative challenges to cope with their working environment?

Methodology

Narrative Design

In this research, a collaborative biography narrative approach was adopted. Participants of the study include assistant professors known to be recent returnees of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program. They were invited through a WhatsApp message sent to 10 random assistant professors from a Saudi University, to which only six replied (three females and three males). Therefore, the study sample constitutes six individuals, from which data was collected in the form of narratives. Table 1 shows the demographic information of selected participants. The data for this study is about the professors' narratives, constructed within a "glocalization" (Khondker, 2001) whereby they are experiencing a clash between their local and newly established identities.

Collaborative biography in education is defined as "a disciplined way of understanding people's beliefs and actions based on his or her past" (Berk, 1980, 94; Cortazzi, 2014). Cortazzi (2014) explains collaborative biography as "the combined description and interpretation of a teacher's life experience carried out by him/her concerning working with one or more researchers." This constituted levels of narration, including "the life as lived and experienced, interpreted to the teacher's self then and now; the life as told the researcher." Therefore, the professors are the teller of their own stories in this study. This approach aims to provide teacher-centered knowledge within a Saudi university context (Cortazzi, 2014, 14).
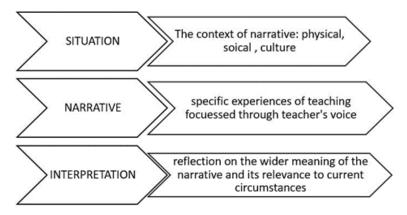
Figure 1. Grumet's Model of Voices in Educational Theory (Cortazzi 2014, 11)

The Narrative took place through meeting and interviewing the professors. The data selection was made based on several data elements, such as promotions, isolation, experience with organizational changes, and changes in policies and regulations. The professors were asked the following prompts:

- Tell the story of how you perceive your identity after returning home.
- Tell the story of how your university received you upon your return to KSA.
- How do you deal with administrative challenges in your university?

Table 1. Demographic Information of Participants

Name	Gender	Designation	Degree	Length of Interview (Hours)
Sami	M	Assistant professor	PhD	1
Omar	M	Assistant professor	PhD	2
Ali	M	Assistant professor	PhD	1.5
Sara	F	Assistant professor	PhD	2
Maha	F	Assistant professor	PhD	2
Amira	F	Assistant professor	PhD	1.5

Data Collection

Data in this study were collected through in-depth and semi-structured interviews that lasted from one to three hours in the Arabic language, which were later translated to English. The main objective of conducting interviews was to find the strategies used by the participants to cope with the Saudi higher education context, academic experience before and after taking their Ph.D. degree, self-perceptions in different their home and host communities, and views of teaching. English supplementary explanations were provided for translating some expressions with cultural connotations, such as professors' beliefs and values.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory was applied to analyze the data. The transcript of data acquired from each participant was based on the open thematic coding. The transcribed data of the interviews were coded to uncover the following themes, personal connections, isolation, and administrative work. The present study has sought to situate the story within a place and setting. The study has dealt with the six assistant professors who were abroad for several years and returned to their home

country Saudi Arabia to expand their knowledge area. The study has reflected on the conflicting identities faced by these returnees due to cultural differences. The participants provide insights on how they maneuver and cope with themselves while facing conflicts associated with their newly formed selves.

Results
Personal Connections

As outlined by the six participants, personal connections were highlighted as a vital strategy that would increase the participants' claimed chances of success in their academic careers. They further added that they would get promoted through personal contacts, occupy prestigious administrative positions, receive valuable and reliable responses to their inquiries and needs, and be added to the university's VIP parties. One of the male participants i.e., Sami, indicated that he spent five years abroad in the US before returning to Saudi Arabia in 2013. From the offset, he recalled coming back from the US as an ambitious academic full of ideas but found himself to be outcasted. He said that his boss treated everyone like his children, and he was their father, and the college was 'his home.' Sami justified this attitude by blaming it on the 'cultural community' in Saudi Arabia. He also accused the university of not considering the effect on the academic returnees returning from scholarships and the conflict that may be caused by the young and the old generations working together. He further despaired that no one cared to discuss the studies conducted by the abroad colleagues. Unlike the US, there was no appreciation or acknowledgment of research in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the experiences of the repatriated professors brought forward remained unrecognized.

On the other hand, a female participant named "Sara" explained personal connections and pulling strings as something commonly found in the Saudi culture. It also showed the importance of context where such practices occurred and how values and ethics were embraced. They were adapted according to each context's dominant cultural and social norms. In the case of this study, it was all about exchanging benefits based on personal interests, particularly personal connections. For her, this was not an easy way of working, and in fact, it made her think of quitting.

Even though she had been back for six months, Sara admitted that there were certain things that she would never 'adjust to,' but she would attempt 'to try to cope.' From an academic level, she 'would like to see less focus on international standard and more focus on what our Saudi students needs. We had a great variety of incredibly talented staff and had earned PhDs from all over the world. They could bring a lot to the table, but they were not given a chance. Upon her return, she had not received any support. The ethics issue was huge for Sara, and she realized in Academia in her college that ethics is not even discussed, let alone practiced. She criticized the environment as not collaborative, saying that her colleagues are deceitful and take advantage of her ideas and contributions. Opportunities for innovation were scarce. She sums it up by saying;

> *'Our faculty was warped with people who took advantage of one another, walked over, and put people down. You had to pull the right strings, which was very difficult to do for me. I was raised with the concept; that if you work hard, you get to your destination.'*

Another participant, Maha, complained about the lack of clarity on procedures, such as the lack of cooperation, stating that 'no support' was offered. She suffered due to a lack of support in her

teaching environment and frustration with the content that she had to teach as she believed strongly that it had not met the students' needs. Another concern that Maha raised was the self-defining way that her colleagues adopted. She brought to light that they generally used their sub-majors to define themselves. She described that 'an uncomfortable environment resulted from their defining practices.' She highlighted that 'each group was trying to impose its ideas or agendas over others.' This had impacted her behavior and made it challenging for her to befriend anyone.

It was striking that any of the participants did not mention the idea of fairness. Fairness was meant as providing equal opportunities to faculty members, which was not mentioned either by male or female participants. Social justice was not a moral issue that concerned faculty members of this study. The actions of different individuals define how academic identity is linked with educational practice, research, scholarship, and teaching (Evans & Nixon, 2015). Even though Gornall et al. (2013) argue that an emotional commitment toward work is required for sustainable working relationships, it is essential to growing academic identity and practice. In line with this, the professors changed their rules, which do not match their identities or their vision of themselves. However, it is observed that the notion of an opposite belief system with these professors holds certain specific identification that they openly admit confessing.

Isolation

Participants shared thoughts about their personal experiences with personal connections. Male participants openly admitted using personal relationships to obtain what they sought to achieve. Female participants, however, found it challenging to pull strings to reach their goals. Male participants narrated that personal connections enabled them to attend conferences. Although attending a meeting was a right by default, in the case of this study, participants claimed that to get exercise such a right, they needed to pull a few strings to get their paperwork done in a speedy timeframe. The promotion was also an issue for all the six participants.

However, two male participants believed that they could get their papers processed through personal connections. They emphasized the importance of knowing influential people, especially leaders who hold prestigious positions and can open doors for ample opportunities in their college. Sami described his feelings by saying that he felt 'a gap' between himself and his colleagues at work. It worked only if his network of contacts was strong, which did not rest well with him. He has given an example of working 'with an experienced and aged man exposed to a wide range of cultural experiences in the workplace.' He described the working atmosphere as 'full of tension.' He did not explain why but emphasized that he could not communicate with him and, in fact, 'avoided communication...out of respect of his age' so as not to clash.

Although Sami emphasized that work is his priority, the family has a social life, which impeded his accomplishments. He found comfort in isolating himself from society because he got used to achieving so much abroad by following the same approach. Sami highlighted the university's lack of accountability. He explained that an assistant professor teacher is not accountable for anything. This is annoying. This is an injustice on the students' part. We do not know how this doctor is teaching. The doctor has all the power. Such practices are absent among international institutes. He further added that he used to hope that every college has its research that could support its

college. He further communicated with the higher studies department to press postgraduate students to research the college's problems to find solutions.

Omar pointed out that his promotion was achieved after an intensive struggle 'because of bureaucracy procedures.' He said he was one of the 'lucky ones' who had some idea on how to apply for his promotion as he was previously responsible for that task before being a repatriate. When he faced difficulties, he would ask his colleagues, who would often refuse to guide him or make excuses. He could not find the forms to fill in. He was constantly being told to go from one person to the next. After a long process 'and much talking back and forth,' he achieved it. He points out that the achievement resulted from his efforts, i.e., without the cooperation of his colleagues. This is because he went through such an erroneous process. He took it upon himself to create a file with all the necessary forms so that other people would not have to go through what he had to experience.

Omar continued to explain his struggle and outlined that the College Board took five months to hold a meeting, which resulted in the delay of his promotion. He, therefore, had a lower income, taught for extended hours, and had been stripped of the advantages of conducting research. He further emphasized the lack of cooperation between faculty members, which he described as 'selfish.' He stated that one who got promoted does not care about others. Generally, they tend to excuse themselves and throw the responsibility from one person to another. He went on to say:

> *'That even academic development was lacking. Though there were attempts of academic organization for improvements, still many efforts were needed. It felt like we were doing the same thing repetitively, and honestly, until now, I cannot understand why we were still relying on this way of teaching. The aspect of the research was not utilized in the college because the focus was on how to meet the policies and keep everything internationalized. This practice had neglected the needs of the Saudi student population in a university which were generally put aside.'*

Relationships with colleagues were deceptive. They claimed that they had different interests and management perspectives. Such as, they were divided into groups and parties according to their ethical beliefs and specialization and, more importantly, their connections. Participants felt disconnected because they could not contribute to significant policy changes or be respected or acknowledged for the knowledge they held in research and teaching. They were comfortable teaching their classes and leaving without being involved in meetings or extra-academic activities.

Administrative Work

Administrative work was a two-coin strategy that participants used. They either escape from it or run into it. Most of our participants were not interested in admin work and viewed it as paperwork that had little to offer to make substantial changes or professional development. They perceived admin work as to where they had gone to do what was required without considering their experience or knowledge. Most of the participants assumed the position to be of trivial importance. They even expressed their discomfort in approaching people who worked in the admin department of their college. Sami also blamed leaders who fear the failure of an idea 'because it will reflect upon him and his position.' However, he had pointed out that even though his boss was afraid, he nevertheless provided opportunities for discussion, and he had 'an open-door policy,' but no decisions were made. He describes the process as 'self-development.' He further pointed out

that these benefits were received because he had good connections. Priority was given to those in administrative positions because 'administrative work at the university is extremely strenuous.'

Ali, like Sami, was unhappy with the system as he explained that it was a 'centralized system,' meaning one has to refer back to the top of the pyramid, i.e., 'the bottom-up policy.' The emphasis was placed on the need for a 'new infrastructure' in the university. Ali stressed the importance of having good relationships with people. He reminded the researchers that it is crucial to have a good relationship with people. He gave an example of why a personal connection is essential, saying that he was added to all-important WhatsApp groups by his friend, the "Dean" of the college. However, the need to accept 'bureaucracy' is one of the challenges. Even though he admitted that one is recognized by their work, not by how nice or kind one is to their colleagues, Ali still received no help for his paperwork. The administration was not helpful, and he had to do everything by himself. He said someone eventually helped him, but he had a friendly relationship with that person.

Omar pointed out how he was treated differently when he was promoted. He described how he was treated when he was a Teacher's assistant regarding how his colleagues dealt with him. He felt as if he was 'a nobody' and indicated it as 'they do not even look at you.' However, he pointed out the striking difference between then and the time when he came back after completing his Ph.D. This difference was in terms of being welcomed and embraced by staff while offering him a variety of administrative positions. Still, he refused any administrative work as he simply wanted 'to go to class and return home.' He reasoned his decision by explaining that the environment was unsuitable, and there was no financial gain from it, so why should he 'exhaust' himself. He preferred to concentrate on research. Administrative work was 'paperwork,' and 'there was no decision making.' Omar's academic aim was to see research projects as a reality and publish 'in high impact journals' even if it took up to a year to post. He described his challenges of not being able to go to conferences because of the college's delay. He highlighted that it was not the university's fault, but instead, the college itself was to be blamed. Even though many people traveled and came back, the Saudi 'mentality' was the same.

Maha and Sara indicated a lack of professionalism; people do things for favors, not because it is their job. As Maha pointed out, 'When I needed something from admin, I went with a smile and ensured I got on her good side because otherwise, I might not get answers if I asked questions, or she might stall me. Policies were blurry and hidden. Admin needed to be completely revamped ethically, and it needed better supervision. You make connections so you can be informed. It feels very degrading as an academician in a respected university, as it made me think of leaving.'Amira seemed to be distressed with the unsupportive attitude of college personnel and the absence of explanation of its processes related to promotion, appraisal, and occupational process. She concluded, 'I strongly felt that this practice must be revised as I knew my academic position and then planned my course of action accordingly.'

He adapted the Saudi way of living over three years. He further emphasized the significance of knowing people at the university, especially the deans or vice deans. He stated that there is a lack of cooperation among colleagues in the college. Initially, he anticipated working in collaboration with people but instead realized that colleagues were forming 'groups.'

Discussion

This study provides insights into the coping strategies used to construct academics' identities in Saudi higher education. The findings indicated that participants in this context used three strategies: namely, personal connections, isolation, and administrative work. Personal contacts were found helpful in coping with their working demands. At the same time, it was regarded as a disgraceful strategy by the female participants who would never use it to get their hard work rewarded. This was considered an ethical value that participants would like to believe and hold, but personal connections and relationships were crucial with the people in power. Isolation was the second strategy mentioned by participants. They were exhausted from academic practices inconsistent with their interest and expectations. They were pushed to the edge and marginalized by not being allowed to speak their thoughts concerning teaching practices and policies. A similar pattern of results was obtained by Churchman & King (2009), who used a narrative lens to explore the identity perspectives of academic staff. They pointed out strategies such as; isolation and anonymity that were used to show passive resistance to the changes in their workplace.

Overall, the findings of this study are backed by the results of another study conducted by Knights & Clarke (2014), who found that insecurity and fragile academic identities take three forms: imposters, aspirants, and preoccupied with existential concerns. It is because they lack confidence in their educational capabilities. They doubt their capacity to write research papers and act as an excellent academic staff. A gap was identified between the ideal and possessed academic image, which increased their sense of insecurity and anxiety (Knights & Clarke, 2014). Parkinson (2017) believed that higher education was a place where unstructured education could occur. It was further thought that the new structured norms set in education, such as writing learning outcomes and teaching aims, may leave no room for spontaneous learning. Another reason for isolation was their relationship with colleagues. In this study, participants claimed that their relationships with colleagues were weak. They shared no interest and are different in sub-majors. Thus, participants found themselves isolated and disconnected. These findings are in line with those proposed by Gizir (2014). The participants have individual values and goals, and they are ignorant of the organization's functions or faculty goals.

Administrative work was a strategy that appealed to a few participants and was resented by the majority. Omar indicated that he had prior experience in admin work before completing his degree. Still, upon finishing his degree, he did not want to do anything with admin work, which he referred to as paperwork. These findings agree with the study of Allmer (2018), as it stated that the way of organizing and practicing management impacted the participants' sense of loyalty and ambition. Unlike male participants who showed a vast understanding of admin work practices, female participants had little knowledge of the admin work or duties. Such a finding was also concluded by Allmer's (2018) study where women were disadvantaged in the higher education system and could not occupy higher positions.

It could be a universal reality that women had ineffective knowledge of admin work not because they were incompetent but because men side-lined them (Allmer, 2018). This could be an area that requires further investigation, especially in the Saudi context, where women are restricted to specific cultural and social boundaries. The asserted claims in the present study were consistent with earlier studies, which considered it a universal topic and an emerging issue. The present study

believed that structured universities might deprive one of drawing back the knowledge as professors, where one had no choice but to deal with it and think of how one could survive and adapt to the system. The study directed and motivated the researchers to examine this matter in further research.

Conclusion

The present study provides a detailed insight into the practices of the higher education sector in KSA. It reveals how a group of professors use specific strategies to navigate higher education and construct their academic identities. In addition, incidences related to the conflict of two opposite parties with different values and expectations, the participants and the structured administration system, where each struggles to have its way of teaching and managing administration work in the university, are also provided. The range of changes and stressors have shown that identity changes advance the quality of students' learning and teaching at universities together with greater student diversity. On the contrary, analysis of these reflective narratives portrays fundamental concerns associated with the transition from assistant teachers to assistant professors. Therefore, there is a need for teachers' mentorship and opportunities to develop and maintain practical scholarly communities. Such a clash would likely surface with the rapid movement toward achieving a highly structured education system. Both parties must find common ground through which they can practice their beliefs that may lift the university's academic level. Also, the desired level of job satisfaction of the administrators and academics can be achieved in an environment where no party feels the oppressive control of the other.

Implications

The adoption of academic positions emphasizes both the learning and its increasing importance to universities. In addition, a range of benefits has been offered by these positions to the university, individual academics, and departments that would not otherwise be possible. For instance, the active participation of academics in the King Abdullah Scholarship Program is likely to have far-reaching positive impacts on students. Acceptance and respect from the broader university community will be required for these academic positions and identities, with academics being identified for their commitment and dedication to continuously enhancing education practice. Faculty and departmental leaders should focus on these identity changes and offer support and opportunities for academics to explain leadership in education at international, institutional, and national levels. Essentially, validating this academic identity will depend on academics presenting to their peers using high-quality pedagogical investigation and its scholarly dissemination, leading to national and international recognition in higher education.

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