PERCEPTIONS OF CHANGE IN RURAL SAUDI ARABIA: A CASE STUDY OF CULTURE
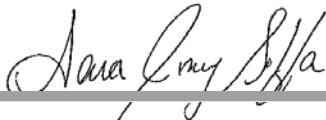
A dissertation submitted to Edgewood College Doctor of Education degree program in Educational Leadership in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree,
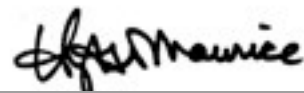
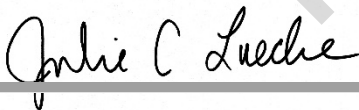Doctor of Education

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PERCEPTIONS OF CHANGE IN RURAL SAUDI ARABIA: A CASE STUDY OF CULTURE

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Abstract

This was a qualitative case study that drew on studies of discourse analysis in education, sociology, and anthropology. I analyzed data from ten interviews of adult male residents of one rural area of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that is undergoing redevelopment, raising issues of globalism and multiculturalism. I found two main themes of material and subjective culture and four sub-themes of distribution, production, exchange, and consumption of discourses and practices. These data and analyses were evidence of changes in local discourses and practices. My cultural-historical framework portrayed how their material and subjective cultural norms were negotiated. I conclude that cultural norms in rural Saudi remain conservative and recommend that acculturated researchers conduct further studies in regions undergoing similar challenges.

Acknowledgements

My deepest gratitude goes to everyone at the Department of Education community for their unconditional support throughout the process of this achievement. It was my great pleasure to learn from my advisor Dr. Henry St. Maurice, whose knowledge and expertise have helped me to continuously grow. My sincere appreciation also goes to my country for offering me this exceptional opportunity to learn.

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my family for their love and encouragement, especially my mom who has taught me to dream.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

This was a case study of a rural area in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). It will use a framework of cultural-historical-activity theory and qualitative methods to examine norms of material and subjective culture in Neom, a new city in a rural northwestern part of the KSA, with a population of about 20,000, covering an area of 26,500 kilometers and extend for about 500 kilometers over the Red Sea coast. In this study, culture is defined as follows: "… that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by [a human] as a member of society" (UNESCO, 2017). Culture has been categorized in two types: material culture such as dress and food, or subjective culture such as values and norms (Triandis, 2002; UNESCO, 2017). This study will seek evidence of both types.

Neom is expected to grow into a mega-city that is planned to be an international hub, due to proposed extensive changes called Saudi Vision 2030, described as follows: "Our Vision is built around three themes: a vibrant society, a thriving economy and an ambitious nation." (Saudi Vision 2030, 2017, p. 13). Vision 2030 is designed to bring a contemporary perception to a traditional established social order as part of a national transformation. Studies of Vision 2030 (e.g., Diwan, 2016; Friedman, 2017; Samin, 2015; Thompson 2017), elaborate on its perspective and objectives. This case study and will examine perceptions of cultural changes among participants in a region that is planned to become a mega-city called Neom (Bostock, 2019), shown on a map in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Map of Study Site

Note: from http://www.neomzone.com/plan.html

As proposed, Neom will cost over $500 billion, and was described as a "a desert dream," in the following terms:

Neom will be an independent, vibrant, diverse new society of millions in the North-West corner of Saudi Arabia at the intersection of Egypt and Jordan. It will be the most exciting, fulfilling place to live and work on the planet. It will offer world-class education, healthcare and culture. Underpinned by advanced, automated, zero-carbon infrastructure and forward-thinking, business-friendly governance. A tribute to humanity's timeless ambition, the herald of a new era and a new standard for centuries to come. (Neom, 2019, p. 4).

The area's framework for quality of life suggests thirteen major attributes included residential and governmental benefits, work, health and educational quality, safety and security. The last point of the thirteen was "comfort with social norms," as follows:

Neom will be a place where everyone will feel comfortable and respected, regardless of background. Neom will guarantee the right to self-expression and will not tolerate discrimination." (Scheck, Jones, & Said, 2019; Neom, 2019, p. 16).

Major cultural changes in its cultural norms have begn with a new commercial airport built in 2019. Neom has hosted many events, from the highest meeting of the council of ministers including the King, to other regional and international countries' presidents, to mixed-gender international sporting events (Alarabiya, 2018; Alsharq Al-Awsat, 2018, Batrawi, 2019), Neom's transformaton is a major project in KSA's Vision 2030.

Background

The KSA's geographic isolation, gender segregation, hierarchical relations, family orientations, tribalism and religion have combined into a distinct, autonomous, manifested, and inherited Arab-Islamic culture (Commins, 2015; Cook, 2014; Miller 2016). Since its founding in 1932, the country has adopted Islamic Sharia as its rule of law and Quran as its constitution (Guta & Karolak, 2015, pp. 41–56). From 1960 to 2017, the population of the KSA grew from 5 million to 33 million and is changing from about three-quarters rural in 1960 into about one eighth by 2030 (World Urbanization Prospects, 2018 & World Bank, 2019). For generations on the Arabian Peninsula, tribalism has provided stability and maintained security in the middle of a disunited, lawless, empty desert; as Misal (2014) stated, "such a system has a strong historical precedent, is deeply rooted in the Saudi mind and influences the behaviour of both tribal and non-tribal members (p. 119). Sowayan (2009) added that, "Obviously it is not easy for a *biduan*

to leave their '*Sloom al'arab'* [tribal] cultural norms and comply with state regulations that were formulated by modern mentality" (n.p.). Tribalism establishes unity among its members.

Another unifying cultural institution in KSA is religion. Alsaggaf and Williamson (2004) said that, "Religion and culture in Saudi Arabia not only shape people's attitudes, practices, and behaviors, but also shape the way they see and do things and perceive their lives" (p. 5). According to Hildebrandt, El Abourri, and Alibraheem (2014) because the KSA was the place of birth of the Prophet and Islam, 97% of Saudis between the ages of 16 and 29 reported that Islam is important or really important to them, with family being the strongest institution of cohesiveness in the Saudi culture (p. 94). Consequently, most Saudis state their unity in the term *Ummat Al-Islam*, an Islamic community of believers.

As a religious society, the role of the comprehensive Islamic *ummah* has had a strong influence on what is considered appropriate cultural norms. (Brown, 2016). As Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins (2004) stated, "The concept of *ummah* not only removes barriers within states, but also generates a globalised community, one which unites believers by a common fate and experience" (pp. 41-57). *Ummat al amir ballma'afro wa alnahi an almonkar*, 'the community that invites good and forbids wrong', these believes and conceptualizations have shaped the society (Akram, 2007; Cook, 2000 & 2014) and a collective Islamic culture.

In the Holy Qur'an, *ummah* was described as follows:

And indeed this, your *ummah*, is one *ummah*, and I am your Lord, so fear Me." [Qur'an, Surah Al-Mu'minun (23:51–52)]. A different verse called for having a community that commands good and forbids wrong. "And among you there should be an *ummah* who invite to good and enjoin what is right and forbid the wrong. (Qur'an, Surah Ale-Imran, 3:104).

Nonetheless, many scholars argue that the future of *ummah* will not be unified but of differentiated community consisting of *ummahs* representing distinguished regions incorporating their own history (Hall & Gay, 1996; Hassan, 2006; Henry & Springborg, 2001). They suggested that hybridity and authenticity constitute the most important challenges for the Muslim *ummah*. In the small community of Neom that is expected to host thousands if not millions of internationals within the next few years, the forces of globalization and urbanization will shift its perceptions (Chulov, 2019; Nereim & Abu-Nasr, 2019). Rural citizens of the KSA, especially those under the age of 30, have are altering their aspirations and ambitions as they experience sudden changes in traditional associations to their communities, tribes, and families (Northam & Tanis, 2019). This study will focus on participants' perceptions of those changes.

Purpose & Question

This was case study focused on perceptions of changes in the culture of Neom, an area by the Red Sea in northern rural Saudi Arabia. I selected a purposive sample from a population of about 20,000 residents. Cultural norms prevented me from interviewing prticipants who did not identify with my gender. With the sample that I had, I explored subjective and objective types of culture across different social groups in their local settings.
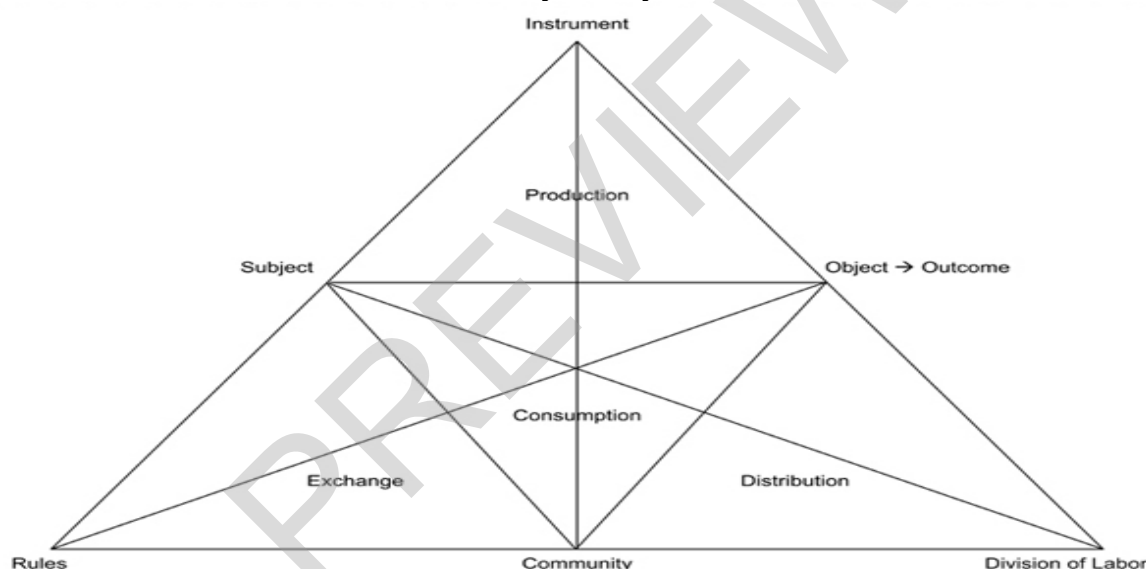
The purpose of this study was to show small-scale effects of large-scale cultural changes, to a samll rural community in northwestern part of the country. I examined Saudi culture as an activity system that forms, maintains, and manifests production, distribution, and consumption of discourses, practices, and artifacts. As Sannino, Daniels, and Gutiérrez (2009) stated, "In activities, humans develop their skills, personalities, and consciousness. Through activities we also transform our social conditions, resolve contradictions, generate new cultural artifacts, and create new forms of life itself" (p. 1). This was a qualitative study of activity systems in which

subjective cultural norms undergo transformation. I analyzed and assessed perceptions of societal

and cultural changes. The following research question guided this study: How is Saudi Arabia's

cultural transformation being perceived?

Theoretical Model

This study was based on cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), as described by Roth

and Lee (2007). CHAT systematically links production, exchange, distribution and consumption

of both material and subjective culture in specific environments as shown in discourses,

practices, and artifacts (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Model of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory

As Roth and Lee (2007) explained, Figure 2 "depicts one concrete realization of an activity

system which contains all of the theoretical terms: subject, object, means of production, division

of labor, community, and rules, and it contains the higher-order processes of production,

exchange, distribution, and consumption" (p. 197). In CHAT, activities by individuals in specific

groups in their cultural-historical context produces evidence of cultural changes in actual places

and times. Yamagata-Lynch (2007) further stated, "… activity theorists are concerned with

upholding human activity- the historical results of the division of labor - as *the* fundamental unit of analysis" (p. 451). In brief, CHAT examines activity systems in ten theoretical terms that were used in this study for constructing protocols and analyzing data.

Moreover, CHAT aids in study systems during changes. For example, in Muslim religious communities there are implicit boundaries between customary cultural norms and new norms made possible by technology, such as virtual prayers (Sardar, 2016). CHAT theory provides a framework to show how subjective cultural norms change at such boundaries. Engeström (2009) argued that, "Boundary crossing occurs because human beings are involved in multiple activities and have to move between them… Boundary crossing provides material for double stimulation. It requires negotiation and re-orchestration" instances in Sannino, Daniels, & Gutiérrez 2009, pp. 313–314). This study will use CHAT as a framework for analyzing qualitative data from interviews. It will seek evidence of cultural changes and negotiated boundaries among traditional cultural norms and new ones in terms of the ten theoretical terms of CHAT.

Significance

This study comes at a crucial time in the KSA's history, especially in the Neom area. It provides critical data about developments in those places. It also contributes to studies of culture in many societies. It further contributes to the literature of studies using CHAT to examine changes across boundaries within cultural-historical activity systems.

Summary

This qualitative case study investigated cultural changes by analyzing perceptions of material and subjective cultural norms by a purposive sample of citizens in one region of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Its purpose was to examine sociocultural changes by analyzing

discourses and practiceswithin cultural-historical activity systems in one case, a rural area

undergoing rapid development and sociocultural transformation.