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Male Libyan Muslim Students' Perceptions of their  
Sociocultural and Academic Adjustment during their Sojourn  
in Winnipeg, Canada in the 1980s.

by

PATRICIA A. FAWCETT-FRAIN

A THESIS

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of  
the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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## ABSTRACT

This study is an exploration and presentation of twelve Libyan Muslim students' perceptions of their sociocultural and academic adjustment in Winnipeg, Canada. The major question addressed is: How do Libyan students cope with an unfamiliar sociocultural and educational setting?

In order to explore the students' point of view, a qualitative research approach was employed. Two broad interview questions were asked of each student during in-depth taped interviews with individual students. The transcripts of these interviews were carefully read and examined, themes were identified, and each theme was given a concept label which seemed to express the meaning of a given passage.

In order to improve the credibility of the findings, two techniques were used: member-checking and triangulation. Member-checking entailed summarizing the main points of the interview to each participant so that he could give further clarification, correct misunderstandings, and confirm that he had been understood. Triangulation is a process to validate each piece of information against one or more other

sources. In other words, no single piece of information was given serious consideration unless it could be validated by a similar piece of information from another source - in this case, another student transcript.

Main themes presented in this study were selected on the basis of reappearance in and across student transcripts, and on "emphasis" in the sense that individual students spent far longer discussing themes which were personally meaningful to them than they did other, less meaningful areas.

Findings in the area of sociocultural adjustment present students' perspectives in three areas: Religiosity and Religious Beliefs; Friendships; and Male-Female Relationships. Academic findings present students' perspectives in four areas: Language, Language and Academic Studies; General University Studies; and Expectations versus Reality. Student coping strategies in these areas are also presented and described.

The recommendations of this study are that individual orientation sessions be available at institutions of higher education for groups of international students from the Islamic world; that pre-University English-as-a-Second

Language programs be from three to six months duration; that the Canadian Bureau of International Education (CBIE) and the sponsoring agency in Libya explain to each student individually exactly what a particular 'field of study' means in terms of the Canadian context in order to prevent disappointment upon arrival; that student contracts regarding field of study be reviewed with individual students after first year of university/college study; that international students be encouraged to arrive at the end of one academic year in order to prepare themselves culturally, psychologically, and emotionally for the following academic year; that university staff, including professors working with international students, be given an orientation to students' cultures and religious traditions.

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

#### Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the adjustment process of one particular group of non-immigrant male Arab Muslim university students - the Libyans.

The major question addressed in this study is: How do Libyan students cope with an unfamiliar sociocultural and educational setting?

In this study, 'sociocultural' aspects of adjustment refer to the broad spectrum of Libyan students' non-academic life in Canada; whereas 'academic' refers to those aspects of adjustment which are directly related to the students' university studies in Canada.

The Libyan students in this study are referred to as 'contract' students as they have been recruited, selected, and sponsored by the Libyan government to study in Canada. The Canadian Bureau of International Education (CBIE), based in Ottawa, is responsible for the administration of contract scholarship programs for these and other international students. CBIE negotiates with governments and/or individual companies in a foreign country, and then arranges for education or training in Canada by negotiating contracts with universities and colleges. Before the students undertake their studies in Canada, they must sign a contract and agree to abide by certain contract stipulations as set out by their sponsors. Once students have received their degree, they are expected to return home and work for various sponsoring institutions in Libya - in this case, Atomic Energy and the Secretariat of Education.

#### Background and Need for the Study

As Canada has become a major receiver of foreign students since the late 1960s (CBIE, 1977), it is important for Canadian educational institutions to make a concerted effort to understand some of the difficulties foreign students

encounter in their attempts to adjust to a new and often drastically different sociocultural and academic environment. This knowledge will not only increase our understanding of world cultures, and a variety of world views, but it will also enable educational institutions to appreciate varying foreign students' needs and to plan orientation and academic programs to meet these needs.

Worldwide, there are over one million students studying in post-secondary institutions outside of their own countries. According to a Report published by the Special Joint Committee on Canada's International Relations in 1986, Canada is one of the top five destinations for international students. Canada "together with France, Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom, takes about 60 per cent of all foreign students." (Council of Ministers of Education 1986:95). As Manitoba is one of the few Provinces which has no differential fees for international students, it is an especially attractive destination. Indeed, in the five years from 1982-87 only the Prairie Provinces increased their international student population - from 6,098 in 1982-83 to 7,217 in 1986-87. (CBIE 1987;31). We can, therefore, anticipate that this trend will continue into the 1990s.

In the early 1980s there were 65,000 foreign students studying in Canada. As noted by Al-Yassini (1986:22), 3,854 of these students were of Arab background. These Arab students come from many different countries and cultures, including: Lebanon, Libya, Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and others. Although these students come from distinct cultures, they are often lumped together in the literature as if there were no differences among them (Patai 1973; Meleis 1982; Hall 1979; Rodinson 1979). Ayman Al-Yassini of The Canadian Bureau of International Education (CBIE 1986) states:

Given the low calibre of research on Arab culture and Arab students in Western institutions, there is ample room for a more constructive approach which avoids the use of cultural cliches and views the students as individuals as well as members of their own community. (p.18)

As an extensive search of the literature has failed to reveal any research on Libyan students studying in Canadian institutions, and as the media continues to perpetuate stereotyped views of Arabs in general and Libyans in particular, this study is an effort to fill this gap in the literature while at the same time attempting to alleviate misconceptions and ignorance about the Libyans.

As mentioned, the majority of Libyan students studying in Canada are referred to as 'contract' students as each individual student has signed a contract with the Libyan government to complete his\* academic education in a university or college in Canada, and then return to Libya. Therefore, although the Libyans are also visa students in the sense that they have been issued a Student Authorization by the Department of Employment and Immigration, they are also unique in that they come to Canada in groups, have signed a contract and, therefore, must adhere to contract stipulations, such as area of study and so on.

#### Research Design and Procedure

In order to explore the students' point of view, and to discover the 'lived experience' of Libyan students during their sojourn in Canada, a qualitative 'naturalistic'

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\* All the students in this study are males. Indeed, most, if not all, of the Libyan students studying in Canada at this time are male.

research approach was selected. As Bogden and Taylor (1975) state:

Qualitative methods allow us to know people personally and to see them as they are developing their own definitions of the world. We experience what they experience in their daily struggles with their society .... Qualitative methods enable us to explore concepts whose essence is lost in other research approaches. Such concepts as beauty, pain, faith, suffering, frustration, hope and love can be studied as they are defined and experienced by real people in their everyday lives. (p.4-5)

Whereas quantitative research methods are most often employed to predict and explain; qualitative methods are more relevant when the aim is to understand and explore. The aim of this particular study then was to understand and explore the adjustment experiences of Libyan university students studying in Canada. The researcher made a conscientious attempt to approach this topic with an open mind in that she did not entertain any explicit preconceived hypothesis which she was hoping to prove or disprove. However, she did have an interest in finding out about the adjustment experiences of individual Libyan students.

The researcher decided on an interview study rather than on a questionnaire study because her own experiences\*\* with

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\*\* See Researcher's Background section in this chapter.

these Libyan students has led her to believe that Arab students, at least Libyan Arab students, are more comfortable working on a personal verbal interaction level rather than doing "paper work" as is required by a questionnaire. This Arab student orientation to the verbal has also been noted by Meleis (1982). Indeed, Jarrahi-Zadeh and Eichman (1970) found that Arab students had the lowest rate of return of questionnaires in their study on the impact of sociocultural factors on Middle-Eastern students. Also, Libyan students in general seem, from this researcher's observations, rather suspicious when asked to note anything on paper.

In order, therefore, to uncover the Libyan students' adjustment experiences, the researcher developed two broad interview questions (Appendix A). Spradley (1979) suggests using "grand tour" type questions in the initial stage of an interview that seem to ask the participants to tell the interviewer what they think s/he ought to know about him. The intent of this type of question is to unearth what is important enough to follow up in detail.

A pilot study that consisted of one two-hour interview with one Libyan student was undertaken to field-test the questions and to practice and refine the researcher's



interview skills. As a result of this pilot study, the questions were modified; for example, initially the first question asked students to describe their adjustment 'problems'. This word was then changed to "experiences", a more neutral term. Also, the pilot study helped refine the research instrument - in this study the interviewer herself - in the sense that it brought to her attention the need to restrain her own natural penchant for verbosity in order to listen, and actively attend to the participants' stories.

It became evident throughout the course of the actual study, that once a participant relived his experience he seemed to focus on certain areas that were of significance to him. The interviewer then used probes (Appendix B) to elicit further information, sample situations, or to encourage the participant to elaborate upon his experience.

The students for this study were selected on the basis of availability in terms of time, their willingness to partake in such a study, and their ability to provide as much detailed information as possible regarding their adjustment experiences in North American society. As the interviewer had previously taught these students in a university class, she also used her own knowledge and judgement in order to select participants who reflected the diversity of the

Libyan contract students studying in Winnipeg at the time. For example, she selected students from both groups - Atomic Energy students, and Secretariat of Education students; some of the students had been here for two years at the time of the interviews, others for six years; some students were from Libyan cities - Benghazi and Tripoli, others were from smaller towns/villages outside of the cities; some were practising Muslims others were non-practising at this particular time. There were also personality differences in that some students had a tendency to be quiet and reflective while others, in the subjective judgement of the interviewer based on her acquaintance with these students, were more verbose. This type of selection process is referred to as "purposeful sampling" by Lincoln and Guba (1985; 201). The ultimate aim is to generate enough information "upon which the emergent design and grounded theory could be based" (p.201). This type of sampling is very different from the concept of "population" used in quantitative and other more conventional research:

It is based on informational, not statistical, considerations. Its purpose is to maximize information, not to facilitate generalization. (Lincoln and Guba 1985:202)

The aim of the present study is not to generalize, but to explore and describe the experiences of certain Libyan

students at a particular time in a particular place. It is, therefore, left up to other researchers who may wish to replicate this study, to determine whether the situations described herein are applicable in their particular context.

Although this type of selection process may be criticized when compared with the 'representative of population' sampling undertaken in conventional studies, it must be remembered that the aim of the present study is not to generalize but to discover and understand as indepth as possible the adjustment experiences of male Libyan students now living and studying in the context of Canadian society; and, as noted by Lincoln and Guba, context is critical in this type of inquiry and each context is dealt with on its own terms:

In naturalistic investigations, which are tied so intimately to contextual factors, the purpose of sampling will most often be to include as much information as possible, in all of its various ramifications and constructions; hence maximum variation sampling will usually be the sampling mode of choice. The object of the game is not to focus on the similarities that can be developed into generalizations, but to detail the many specifics that give the context its unique flavor. (Lincoln and Guba 1985:201)

In the above passage 'maximum variation sampling' refers to

the documentation of unique variations which have emerged in adapting to different conditions or contexts.

Participants of this present study were twelve Libyan science majors studying at a Manitoba university. These students had been in Canada from two to six years. The average age of students was twenty-four years old and, at the time of this study, they were all unmarried. Also, at the time of this study, their English language skills were such that most of them were able to manage the level of English required to participate in a university program.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), twelve students are considered adequate for this type of study as "new information becomes progressively scarcer" (p.234) as the inquiry achieves focus and the more salient aspects of the the particular situation are identified. By the same token, and as was the case in the present study, information that is believed important initially is later deemed irrelevant in the sense that it does not reoccur as one delves deeper into the experiences of the study participants. Lincoln and Guba (1985) state:

It is likely that, in sharp contrast to the usual situation in conventional inquiry, sampling can be terminated after a rather small number of elements

has been included; for example, in interviewing members of a particular group ... it is usual to find that a dozen or so interviews, if properly selected, will exhaust most available information; to include as many as twenty will surely reach well beyond the point of redundancy. (p.235)

Indeed, Lincoln and Guba's observation regarding exhaustion of information was confirmed in the interviews for this study as the information which emerged during the interview sessions did begin to become repetitive once eight or so interviews had been completed. However, the researcher made the decision to interview another few students to confirm that this was, in fact, happening. Once twelve interviews were completed, it became clear that there was indeed a repetition of themes and experiences.

At the outset of each interview participants were asked to sign a Letter of Consent which outlined the purpose of the interview and how the information gathered would be used (Appendix C). They were also requested to fill out a brief questionnaire (Appendix D) for the researcher's own records. Each interview was taped, and field notes were kept so that the interviewer was able to keep track of the main points in each session. At the close of each interview, a process referred to as "member checking" (Lincoln and Guba 1985:236) was carried out to increase the accuracy of the data. This

entailed summarizing the main points of the interview to each participant so that he could give further clarification, correct misunderstandings, and confirm that he had been understood.

During the course of this research, the interviewer also kept a journal which she completed before and after each interview in order to be aware of her own feelings and possible biases. This journal, along with tapes, tapescripts, and fieldnotes, was available for perusal to the researcher's advisory committee.

After each interview, the researcher listened to the tape of the interview and read through her field notes in order to identify patterns and potential themes. Later, when all the interviews had been completed, she read through the transcripts while listening to the tapes so that she could relive the experience and gain a deeper understanding of what each student said about his adjustment experiences in Canada.

Once this initial process was completed, the researcher again read through the transcripts, identified and constructed thematic labels, and gave each theme a tentative concept label (Appendices E and H). These concept labels

were taken from the students' own words or, in some cases, given a concept label by the interviewer which seemed to fit what was said. In order to increase the likelihood that the findings would be found credible, the interviewer used a technique called "triangulation" (Lincoln and Guba 1985:305). Triangulation is a process carried out with respect to the data in that steps were taken to validate each piece of information against one or more other sources. In other words, no single piece of information was given serious consideration unless it could be validated by a similar piece of information from another source; in this case, at least one other interview transcript.

In the next step of this process, themes were then grouped according to two categories: sociocultural adjustment and academic adjustment (Appendices F/G). As there were over nine-hundred pages of tapescripts, and approximately forty themes were identified, selection of themes presented in this thesis were based on the following considerations:

1. Reappearance of certain themes in and across student tapescripts, and
2. Emphasis. Some themes seemed to be given more emphasis by students. This was reflected in the amount of time individual students spent discussing certain topics.

The themes that met the above criteria were, therefore,