

## **They have got more than you think: Cultural Capital and the Undergraduate Achievement of Middle Eastern Women**

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### **Abstract**

The theory of *Cultural Capital* states that students from “high culture” invest in scholastic pursuits and obtain returns in the form of academic achievement (Bourdieu, 1977). It was the intent of the researchers to replicate the study conducted by Geoffrey Moss (2005) within the context of a university setting with undergraduate Middle Eastern women. This small-scale humanities study highlights the cultural capital of Middle Eastern women and their undergraduate achievement. The data for the study was collected in two surveys handed to a random number of female students from a private university in Riyadh (KSA). The study gives a selected view of the context which includes family background and the importance given to academic attainment. Traditionally, Middle Eastern women have been viewed as not having invested into cultural capital. However, the results of this study have proven otherwise. Middle Eastern women do have cultural capital and likewise pursue scholastic activity.

*Keywords:* Cultural capital; academic achievement; GPA; gender,

### **Introduction**

The theory of cultural capital originated from the work of sociologist Bourdieu (1977) who stated that cultural capital consists of familiarity with the dominant culture in a society, and especially the ability to understand and use educated language. For Bourdieu (1977) the influence of linguistic capital [is] particularly manifest in the first years of schooling. Language is not simply an instrument of communication... [it is] the capacity to decipher and manipulate complex structure, whether logical or aesthetic, [and] depends partly on the complexity of the language transmitted by the family. The main argument that Bourdieu (1977) produced was that possession of cultural capital varies with social class, yet the educational system assumed the possession of cultural capital. This fact would make it difficult for lower-class pupils to succeed in the educational system (Sullivan, 2001). The theory of cultural capital, thus, explains patterns of academic success (Kingston, 2001) because the diverse cultural capital of students affects their educational outcomes (Jaeger, 2009). Nieto (1999) also pointed out that each student from a culturally diverse background brings "cultural capital" to the classroom. If this theory of cultural capital holds true, then Middle Eastern women possess and bring forth cultural capital in various degrees at the level of higher education.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Theory of Cultural Capital**

Cultural capital can be defined as the translation of an individual's social class background into educational attainment (Yamamoto and Brinton, 2010). This small-scale research study has replicated Geoffrey Moss's (2005) explorations in order to determine whether or not Middle Eastern women attending university possess cultural capital. Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital states if cultural capital is attained at an early age, essentially it will indirectly effect the attainment of academic achievement and impact motivation at the higher education level (as cited in Yamamoto and Brinton, 2010). Women in the Middle East have long been portrayed as lacking in the area of educational attainment. Numerous studies have been conducted since the appearance of Bourdieu's work in order to determine whether certain cultures possess cultural capital (Sullivan, 2002). However, this has not been the case with regards to the examination of the cultural capital and academic achievement of Middle Eastern women. Thus, the overarching hypothesis that guided this research study was, Middle Eastern women attending a school of higher education possess cultural capital and attain academic achievement.

### **Cultural Capital and Academic Achievement**

There have been several characteristics that have been labeled as being necessary for the attainment of academic achievement while possessing cultural capital (Yamamoto and Brinton, 2010, Jaeger, 2009, Kingston, 2001, and Al-Fadhli and Kersen, 2010). These necessary characteristics determined in previous research, vary from culture to culture and place to place. According to the research study conducted by Yamamoto and Brinton (2010) cultural capital and educational performance attainment in Japan is based upon the following characteristics: (1) a strong reliance on student assessment through standardized examination, and (2) widespread parental investment in academic tutoring and private exam preparation courses for their children. Jaeger (2009) states there should be three characteristics present for the attainment of educational success with the possession of cultural capital, which are the following: (1) parents must possess cultural capital, (2) parents must transfer their cultural capital to children, and (3) children must absorb cultural capital and convert it into educational success. Kingston (2001) related the attainment of academic achievement to the father's education and stated that the magnitude of the "effect" often approximates that of measured ability. In other words, if the father has the ability to attain academic achievement, then the child's chances are greater to obtain the same or similar academic achievement. The research has shown that parental involvement or investment is a key component of attaining academic achievement at all educational levels. It was then predicted that Middle Eastern women's fathers and mothers that had obtained academic success would also transfer their cultural capital upon their children.

### **Cultural Capital and Parental Investment**

Parental investment is one of the key components of cultural capital and academic achievement (Jaeger, 2009). The more parents invest in the educational success of their child, the better chance that child has of attaining academic achievement at any educational level,

especially the higher educational level. Cultural capital has long been associated with social class and background (Bourdieu, 1977). Meaning that the better the social class or background one possesses (the more cultural capital) the better their chances are of attaining academic achievement at any educational level. However, Kingston (2001) argues that cultural capital has no association with class-related practices and academic success. Lamont and Lareau (1988) proposed a useful definition that denotes cultural capital as being similar to money because it can be saved, invested, and used to obtain other resources such as access to economic positions (as cited in Kingston, 2001). Parental investment of cultural capital can determine the academic success of a child. Cultural capital invested in children, could be considered as a pathway for the future of the family. Bourdieu (1977) stated that the family is the key institution for passing on culture and transmits what he calls the basic “habitus”. In Middle Eastern culture, the family is vital in promoting and developing cultural capital within the children of the family, both male and female. It could be theorized that certain genders within certain cultures have more cultural capital placed upon them than others.

### **Cultural Capital and Gender Education**

According to the authors Baker and Brown (2009) the women’s role of obtaining cultural capital and education has changed through time. Bourdieu’s (1986, 244) development of the theory of cultural capital states that “the scholastic yield from educational action depends on the cultural capital previously invested by the family.” Baker (2005) argues that gender is a crucial determining factor of the role of cultural capital in increasing educational achievement among gender and social class, which produce different benefits from cultural capital; more specifically, the effective role of mothers who were a safeguard in the transferal and acquisition of cultural capital even in contexts in which the circumstances were not prosperous (as cited in Baker & Brown, 2009). It could be assumed that male and female cultural capital would differ from one another. The cultural capitals of males are different from females because of the amount of investment the family places upon the achievement of the male or female. If this theory holds truth, then there will be differences among the cultural capital of men and women within different cultural societies. This small-scale study was done to prove that Middle Eastern women, in the particular setting in which the study was carried out, possess cultural capital even within a primarily male dominant society.

### **Context of the Study**

#### **Cultural Capital and Middle Eastern Society**

Cultural capital can be influenced from society to society. It could be perceived that Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of cultural capital could be associated with the social class system of society (as cited in Ovink and Veazey, 2011) which could lend itself to the interpretation, that Middle Eastern society influences the cultural capital of Middle Eastern women. Cultural capital was described as “habitus” by theorist Pierre Bourdieu (1977) meaning individuals from culturally enriched backgrounds are more likely to engage in scholarly activity. Middle Eastern women possess a unique and diverse form of culture, which in turn, would influence in this

particular setting, whether or not they pursue scholarly endeavors. This study has proved that Middle Eastern women in this setting possess cultural capital and pursue scholarly activity even within a society that may seem to be primarily dominated by males.

### **Middle Eastern context of this study**

This study was carried out at Prince Sultan University College for Women (PSU- CW) in Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Due to the religious beliefs of the country, the university is segregated; however, the Higher Management is striving to maintain parallel quality and content on both sides of the developing campus. In its vision statement Prince Sultan University (PSU) states its intention of becoming the most prominent private university in the Middle East. In order to reach this category, it seeks to provide quality education equal to other international universities in the world by focusing its efforts on student success, life-long learning and personal responsibility. The institution's mission statement endeavors to provide the Middle East with quality education by integrating modern technological, pedagogical and human values for the advancement of scientific research, productivity and leadership, towards a more meaningful social life.

The university was founded in 1999 by the business community of Riyadh to celebrate the homecoming of HRH Prince Sultan Abdul Aziz<sup>1</sup>. It received its first enrolment applications at the beginning of the 1999-2000 academic year, initiating with 276 male students who were enrolled in the Preparatory Year Program. In 2001, it addressed the need to offer learning opportunities for females in Saudi Arabia and neighboring Arab countries by establishing the College for Women. PSU is the first private, non-profit institution dedicated to life-long learning opportunities for both men and women in Saudi Arabia. The university currently offers a national reputation for its commitment to service and excellence in teaching and research. The female section currently holds 2169 female students. In words of the female College's Dean<sup>2</sup>: "At PSU-CW, we realize that education is the key to meeting both national and international challenges - on all levels. It is for this reason that we strive not only to produce educated and distinguished individuals, but to create future leaders."

### **Method**

The data for this study was collected during the months of April and May, 2013 at PSU-CW via Survey Monkey<sup>3</sup>. A total of 82 random students were asked to complete two surveys. Four instructors, after receiving the pertinent permission, participated in the data collection<sup>4</sup>. The instructors provided the link to the first Survey webpage where their students were able to access it.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on Prince Sultan University:  
<http://info.psu.edu.sa/pscw/pscw/EN/OfficesServices/PSCW/Default.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Rimah Al Yahya.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.surveymonkey.com/>.

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Orchida Fayez (ENG 103 Instructor), Ms. Aisha Cureton (ENG 101 Instructor), Dr. Roslyn Mohamed and Dr. Carmen Medina (both ENG 103 and IR Instructors).

The students who participated in the first survey were asked twelve questions based on the variables proposed by Bourdieu (1977) regarding their: a) age, b) major, c) GPA<sup>5</sup>, d) gender, e) race, f) mother's highest degree, g) mother's occupation, h) mother's income, i) father's highest degree, j) father's occupation, k) father's income, and l) importance of education. Forty-one female students completed this survey.

The survey inquired about gender as the researchers were hoping the survey would also take place on the men's side of the campus<sup>6</sup>. Unfortunately, the survey was not passed on despite the interest in obtaining results for both genders; thus, yielding the study of Bourdieu's (1977) theory that the female-student group is composed differently from the male-student group as regards social origin, subjects studied and previous school history, for the time being in a hiatus.

A second survey was given to a second group of female students at the end of the semester which gave more detailed insight to the profile of the students. The information that was requested on this second survey was regarding a) country of origin, b) how long they had been studying English and c) where they had studied English. Another forty-one female students took part in this survey. This second survey was handed to a random selection of students belonging to the above mentioned instructors at the end of the final exam. The survey was attached to forty-one random exam papers. The final page was detached from the exam to keep the anonymity of the students.

### **Results**

The results for the first survey revealed that 95.1% of the students were in the 18 to 24 age category while 4.9% were in the 25 to 34 age range. (It is frequent to find married students and pregnant students attending classes as well as students who have 1 to 3 children<sup>7</sup>.)

With regards to the major that students were pursuing, the results disclosed that 51.2% were studying English, 17.1% Business, 7.3% Interior Design, 7.3% also Law and 4.9% others.

Information relating to GPA, (as can be seen in Table. 1.) divulged that 36.6% of the students had achieved 3.6 to 4.0, whilst 51% were over 3 points, and only 9.8% were 2 or below; reiterating our prediction that students in our context had cultural capital.

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<sup>5</sup> Grade Point Average.

<sup>6</sup> The researchers are hoping to carry out the study on the men's side of the campus in the near future as it would be interesting to compare the results.

<sup>7</sup> This aspect would provide material for another study as it would be interesting to see how many students were married, had children, how many children they had, how many students had continued studying despite the family responsibilities, how many had other types of family responsibilities, what the nature of those family responsibilities was, and how many had interrupted their studies

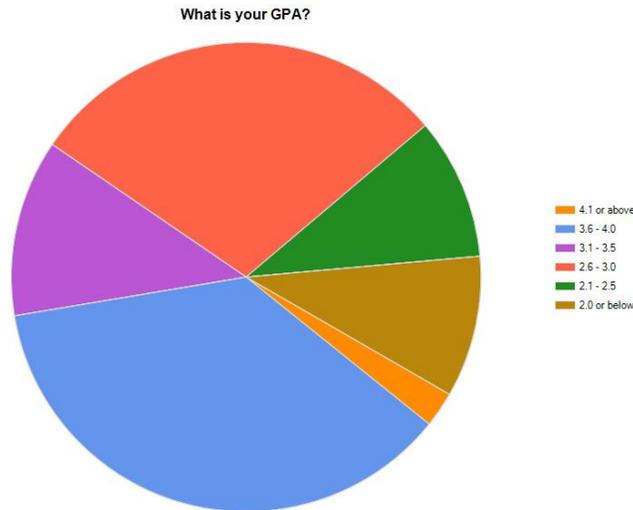


Table 1. GPA ratings for the participants.

The question regarding nationality of students at our college exposed that 85.4% of the students were Saudi Arabian, 7.3% Asian, and 7.3% of other origin.

When enquired about parent’s qualification 30% of the mothers had a Bachelor’s degree while 46.3% of the fathers had the same level of qualification. Other qualifications can be seen in Tables 2 and 3. In regards to occupation, 46.5 of the mothers had an occupation whilst 85% of the fathers had a professional occupation.

78% of the mothers had a monthly income of up to 25000 (approximately €5000) Saudi Riyal while the father’s monthly income was equaled at 50% having an income of up to 25000 Saudi Riyal and another 50% over that amount.

What is the highest level of school your mother completed or the highest degree she received?

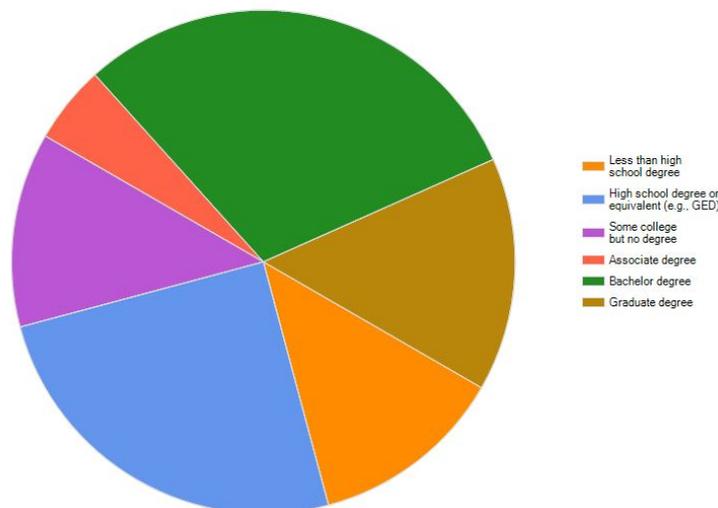


Table 2. Qualification of the mothers.

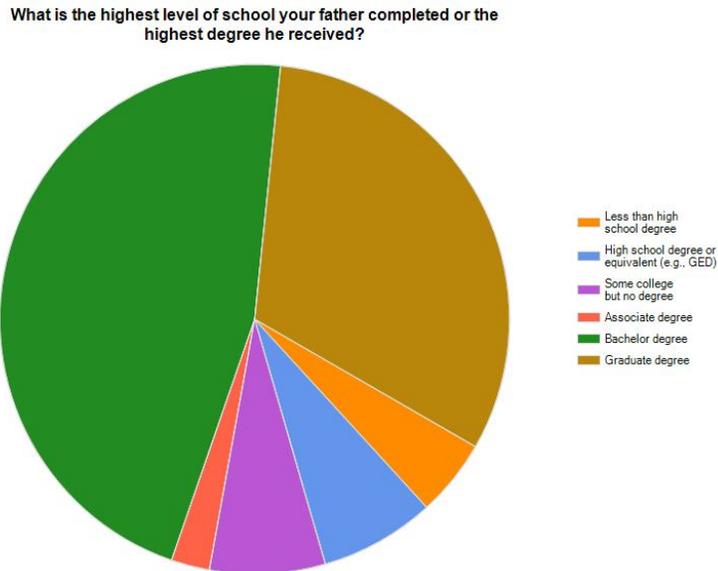


Table 3. *Qualification of the fathers.*

An almost unanimous 97.6% of the surveyed students agreed that education was important; reinforcing the initial thesis that Middle Eastern women (in the context described above) had cultural capital while 2.4 expressed the opinion that education was somewhat important (the striking results are reflected in Table 4).

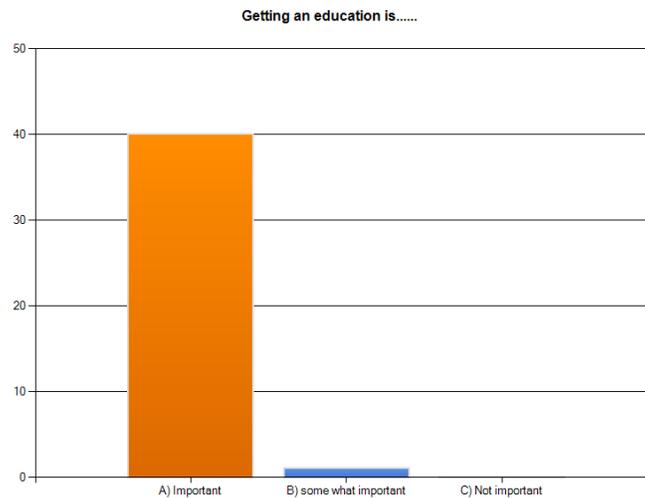


Table 4. *Importance of an education for the participants.*

The second survey revealed that 83% of the students were from Riyadh whilst the remaining 17% originated from Egypt, Jordan, Pakistan, Syria, and Turkey<sup>8</sup>. Another interesting revelation was that fact that 39% of the students had studied English from birth, 29% had studied English for more than 9 years, 17% had studied this language between 5 to 9 years and a mere 15% had studied it for up to 5 years. Finally, regarding the previous institution where students had studied, 17% had studied at international schools, 17% had had an American instructor

<sup>8</sup> Another interesting field for research would be studying the percentages of expats in the city of Riyadh.

whereas 56% had had an instructor of another nationality. These nationalities included British, Canadian, Egyptian, Lebanese, Sudanese, and Syrian.

### Conclusion

Despite the restrictions encountered in the context in which this research was carried out, the instructors are able to conclude that students at PSU-CW, as a representation of Middle Eastern women not only possess, but also yield cultural capital in various degrees. The random study of a group of forty-one women has rendered Bourdieu's (1977) theory replicable in Saudi Arabian society. This study has demonstrated that in the context described, female students have absorbed cultural capital and have converted it in educational success. It has also shown that parents possess cultural capital and that they endeavor to pass it on to their children even though they are females in a predominantly male oriented society. Lastly, the study has opened further research venues such as: a) conducting the study on a male group, b) delving into the family characteristics of the female students in order to learn more about the family culture and relate it to the transferal of cultural capital, and c) studying the expat communities in Riyadh and their transferal of cultural capital.

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