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The Female Experience: Study Abroad Students in Egypt

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ABSTRACT

The Female Experience: Study Abroad Students in Egypt

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This qualitative study explores the experiences of female students on study abroad programs, with the aim of answering the following questions: do they face unique challenges as female students (including harassment or assault), how do they avoid or cope with any negative experiences, and can we as language departments better prepare our students to have the best experiences possible? The participants for the study were primarily 12 of 50 students involved in the Brigham Young University Study Abroad to Cairo, Egypt during Spring and Summer terms 2010. Data include participant observation, student journals, and ethnographic interviews conducted during the last few weeks of the program. Data analysis reflected gendered experiences in socializing with native speakers as well as experiences with harassment, and even sexual assault. The thesis argues that proper student preparation is the key to their continued investment in culture and language learning. Future research could include a look at second language learners across the Middle East, factors that contribute to harassment and assault, and gender as a predictive factor of language gains.

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Introduction

Second language acquisition research has shown that communicating with others is vital to the language learning process. Language mastery requires a great deal of practice: Watson-Gegeo and Nielsen (2003) argue that "language and other forms of cognitive development and knowledge are constructed in and emerge through practice and interaction" (pp. 163-164). In order to practice the target language (L2), learners need the opportunity to socialize with native speakers of the L2. After all, language contact and proficiency level have been shown to have a positive correlation (Wilkinson, 1998; Brecht & Robinson, 1993; Brecht, Davidson, & Ginsberg, 1993; Davidson, 2010). Foreign immersion programs are often considered the ideal place to maximize on this language contact. As Polanyi (1995) notes, "[l]iving abroad for a few months and studying the 'living language' is considered highly desirable and of tremendous importance for honing academically acquired language skills" (p. 271).

Most study abroad students do view fluency as their ultimate goal (Kline, 1998); however, it is not the only reason for foreign study. Study abroad is often valued for both increased familiarity with the culture (Kline, 1998) as well as what is sometimes termed characterological benefits: "study abroad provides a student with an empathetic appreciation of the variety of perspectives that govern people's behavior throughout the world" (Lambert, 1989, p. 26). Regardless of the reasons for participating in one of these programs, students need the opportunities for unstructured interaction with others. Study abroad provides abundant possibilities.

Despite the fact that interaction is pivotal to attain fluency (Siegel, 2003), students are often deterred by a number of factors that may prevent them from socializing in the

target language. Culture shock, social anxiety, self-consciousness, and fear of embarrassment are a few of these obstacles, not to mention a concern for good self-presentation, self-preservation, and physical and emotional safety (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005). Research suggests that women in particular frequently report negative encounters with members of the target culture, leading them to feel rejected by and develop negative perceptions about the target culture (Talburt & Stewart, 1999; Tusting, Crawshaw, and Callen 2002; Twombly, 1995).

Women may experience unique problems related to discrimination and harassment (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005; Polanyi, 1995; Brecht & Robinson; 1993), which may indirectly result in lower proficiency gains in female students than in their male counterparts (Brecht et al., 1993; Brecht & Robinson, 1993; Churchill, 2009; Polanyi, 1995). In fact, Pavlenko (2001) asserts that the link between gender and language learning is a dominant theme for female learners, who frequently reference gender in reporting language learning experiences.

Although research has investigated these issues in a variety of locations, from Spain and France to Japan and Russia, little research has pursued the topic of gender and study abroad in the Middle East. With the aim of exploring these issues in a Middle Eastern context, the present qualitative study focuses on the gendered experience of female study abroad students in Cairo, Egypt, with the goal of answering the following questions:

1) What is the subjective experience of a female student in Cairo?

2) What kinds of experiences do female students have?

3) Do they have issues with gender and harassment, and why or why not?

4) How do they think future students may overcome or even avoid any negative experiences as well as improve on positive ones?

5) How can language departments better enable students to create the best experience possible?

Literature Review

Linguistic communication is a complex phenomenon that is influenced by many sources, including gender, human agency, and environmental affordances. In this section I will cover some ways in which gender influences language use, language learning, and second language acquisition, both at home and abroad. I will also provide a brief explanation of gender in the Middle East, with reference to recent historical developments, and stressing some current ideas about gender in Egypt in particular.

Gender

Gender is considered by Brooker (2003) to be "the social and cultural distinctions between men and women" (pg. 230). These differences are not only socially distinguished but also socially produced. Rather than deriving from a biological sex distinction, gender distinctions are a product of social construction. Ideas about what males and females do or should do help to construct definitions of what it means to be male or female. Accordingly, as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) state, gender "doesn't just exist, but is continually produced, reproduced, and indeed changed through people's performance of gendered acts, as they project their own claimed gendered identities, ratify or challenge others' identities, and in various ways support or challenge systems of gender relations and privilege" (pg.4). Over time, certain behaviors have become labeled as appropriate for males (i.e. playing with trucks) or appropriate for females (i.e. playing with dolls). Thus, children will engage in or avoid an activity in order to live up to cultural gender expectations.

Adhering to cultural notions of gender colors humans' actions, reactions, and interactions. Interestingly children understand these expectations and begin to conform at

a very young age. As early as four to five years old, male children begin to consciously speak with lower pitches and females begin to consciously speak with higher pitches, despite the fact that their vocal tracts have not yet taken on the pitch distinction (chord length) that comes with puberty (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet , 2003).

Linguistic differences between males and females extend far beneath the conscious realm. Recent work by Precht (2002) using the 1995 Longman corpus has shown that women show preferences for specific usage, such as certain euphemisms (*gosh*) and amplifying forms (*so+adjective* and *so much*) more than men. Women have also been known for more frequent use of indirect questions (Macaulay, 2001) and hedging. Gender differences in language use come out as language continues to develop. For example, Siegel (2002) found that girls use the particle *like* more frequently than boys, except in cases where it precedes a number, in which case males led females in usage frequency.

Gendered linguistic differences are also seen in both grammar and pronunciation. According to Labov (1991, 2001) women are more likely to retain standard grammar, but less likely to retain standard pronunciation. In other words, men are slower to make pronunciation changes than women, but more likely to quickly adapt to grammatical change. In fact the beginnings of language shift have often been attributed to women (Pavlenko, 2001b). Furthermore, a large number of studies have also identified women as more proficient in verbal communication in general, as compared to males, who excel in spatially-related activity (Moir & Moir, 1999; Baron-Cohen, 2003; Cameron, 2007). And of course there are the debated, but nevertheless very widespread, ideas that women are more talkative, but less competitive in their speech (Cameron, 2007).

The large body of evidence pointing to gender as a significant factor in first language acquisition (Precht, 2002; Siegel, 2002; Cohen, 2009) has led to the investigation of gender within the context of second language learning. In a study on language learning strategies as measured by the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), Green and Oxford (1995) found that women (and successful learners) used more language learning strategies than did men. Similarly, Goh and Kwah (1997) reported that Chinese females use more compensation strategies (i.e. guessing, using gestures, and so on) and more affective strategies (i.e. self-encouragement, trying to relax, rewarding oneself, etc.) in L2 language learning than do Chinese males.

The idea that a woman's overall advantage in learning language is largely due to her gender is widely held and generally accepted (Davis & Skilton-Sylvester, 2004; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Ellis, 1994), but some researchers believe that this advantage is over-generalized and exaggerated (Erlich, 1994). Indeed some research suggests that the opposite is true (Pavlenko, 2001b), particularly in some study abroad settings (Polanyi, 1995; Siegal, 1996; Brecht & Robinson, 1993).

Gender research on second language acquisition in study abroad has long focused on the impact of gender on linguistic gains (Brecht & Robinson, 1993; Brecht, Davidson, & Ginsberg, 1993; Polanyi, 1995). Most of these studies have been quantitative in nature, investigating gender as a possible variable in language learning. In recent years, however, scholars have begun to research the subjective experience of study abroad and have given particular attention to the role of gender in shaping students' lived experiences (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005; Polanyi, 1995; Wilkinson, 1998).

Gender is a social construct that consistently impacts our everyday activities in minute and subtle ways (Connell, 2002), and therefore has a defining influence on the socializing of students, and their language progress as a result (Brecht & Robinson, 1993; Brecht et al., 1993; Polanyi, 1995; Schumann, 1980). Therefore, there is a considerable amount of research on gender-related experiences on study abroad, with an emphasis on the negative experiences of female study abroad students and the change in their language learning attitudes as a result of what they perceive as sexism and harassment.

In the qualitative literature on American language learners abroad, the gendered nature of the study abroad experience comes to the fore repeatedly. One of the first studies to examine gendered experiences in language learning abroad was Schumann's (1980) autobiographic study recounting her attempts to learn Farsi in Iran. In this study, female gender constituted a problem of gaining access to language learning opportunities. As a woman, Schumann quickly discovered that many contexts for language use were off limits to her. Similarly, Brecht and Robinson (1993) reported that "American women [in Russia] may have fewer—and qualitatively different—opportunities to speak in a mixed-gender setting than American males" (p. 22). For instance, one learner, Agatha, was able to spend an entire evening speaking Russian with a group of women, an opportunity she would not have had if she were male. A contrasting example depicts another female student, Jessica, who reported that she was regularly ignored by native-speaking male interlocutors. She reported that "being a woman resulted in less conversation practice, particularly when the topic was 'intellectual'" (p. 20). Thus differential access to speaking opportunities may have resulted in significantly lower proficiency gains for

women in Russia on study abroad as compared to their male counterparts (Brecht &

Robinson, 1993; Brecht et al., 1993; Polanyi, 1995).

In a pivotal work on gender and study abroad, Polanyi (1995) advances the

discussion, noting the kinds of unpleasant gender-related events that women consistently

face in Russia and linking them to lesser proficiency gains compared to their male

counterparts, as measured by the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI). She claims that the

kinds of social interactions that women face are often uncomfortable flirtatious or sexual

encounters. The average woman in her study "emerges with her virtue intact and with a

sense of a narrow escape and some pride in knowing how to handle herself" (p.284), but

not with the vocabulary or linguistic ability that the men acquire in their interactions.

Thus, gendered experiences resulted in students who were less content and less

competent: the women developed the linguistic capabilities to deal with their harassment,

but these were not the skills tested on the OPI, the assessment used to measure

proficiency gains in their program (p.286).

In contrast, a later study by Davidson in 2010 revealed that gender held

diminished significance in comparison to previous years. Davidson speculated that this

may be due to two factors. His first hypothesis attributes the difference to the "gradual

changes that have taken place in gender roles in Russian society since the collapse of the

Soviet Union" (p. 20). His second hypothesis accredits the improvement to the pre-

departure training provided to the students. This hypothesis will be discussed further in a

later chapter.

Although many studies cite gender as a significant factor influencing the

performance of study abroad students, there is some evidence that it may have potential

effects on other aspects of the experience abroad. A study by Hashim and Zhiliang (2003) on foreign students in Chinese colleges identifies a few marginal gender-based differences: males reported higher stress related to missing classes and females reported higher stress related to getting low grades and working with strangers. There is also some support of the idea that gender is not a significant variable in foreign language learning: Rees and Clapper (2007) reported no gender effects on language progress for British students living abroad in Germany and Austria.

Nevertheless, many studies find significant gender effects, such as those reported by Twombly (1995), who documented the experience of several study abroad females in Costa Rica who were negatively affected after undergoing repeated catcalling. The incidents reportedly caused the students to suffer from decreased motivation, and the students eventually lost interest in interacting with native speakers. A similar work described the experience of one African-American female in Spain who reacted to name-calling, sexual remarks, and other forms of harassment by developing negative feelings toward the Spanish culture (Talburt & Stewart, 1999).

Along the same lines, work by Tusting, Crawshaw, and Callen (2002) reflects the attitudes of students following their residence abroad in Spain who "expressed strongly negatively evaluative comments" about gender issues in groups of Spanish society, emphasizing the sexist nature of the Spanish culture (p. 668). And Isabelli-Garcia (2003) describes the experience of Jennifer, a female student learning Spanish, who felt rejected by the host culture and eventually withdrew from learning the language.

In addition to issues of discrimination and harassment, American female students on study abroad often react negatively to gender norms that they find unfamiliar.

According to Siegal's (1996) study, American women studying in Japan are sometimes frustrated by the expectation to conform to feminine norms that they consider too humble or silly. One Western woman in particular, chaffed at the expectation that women should speak hesitantly and cheerfully, which did not coincide with her own notions of how she felt they needed to act as women.

The challenge the Western woman felt to conform to social gender expectations in Japan is evidence of socially constructed gender norms. As previously stated, gender is socially constructed; moreover, it is constructed differently in different cultures. Women begin to associate with socially constructed ideas of their identity, which presents a challenge in cases in which the socially constructed gender identity of their native culture is constructed differently than it is in the target culture.

One theoretical concept that can help explain these differences, is the idea of affordances. In essence, the study abroad environment *affords* different experiences to different people. The term *affordances,* developed by van Lier (2007), but originally defined by Gibson (1979), refers to the notion that an environment provides both good and bad opportunities to a person based on the personalized aspects of that individual (i.e. age, experience, proficiency, gender, and so on). For example, to a child a tree on the side of the road offers adventure and excitement in climbing its limbs, but to a weary old traveler it is an invitation to rest in the shade. A squirrel on the other hand might view it as a prime location to build a home, whereas a dog, who cannot climb, might be compelled to mark its territory. The environment is the same, but it affords varied opportunities and therefore carries different meaning for varied individuals. Likewise in a study abroad environment, circumstances are different for every student even when the

environment itself is the same, as in the cases of Jessica and Agatha above: the affordances furnished to these students varied based on gender.

Student Agency

Despite the fact that many female study abroad students report negative gendered experiences, research suggests that the students themselves have a good deal of influence over their reactions to their experiences. An article by Kinginger and Whitworth (2005) presents two contrasting examples of female students in France, Deirdre and Jada, who repeatedly faced gender-related problems. Deirdre withdrew emotionally from her previous interest and investment in learning French, because she anticipated some form of harassment everywhere she went. Jada on the other hand "'let the water slide off her back'" and "emerged from [the] experience with her desire to learn French intact" (p. 12). Perhaps most significant was the difference in their language learning progress: Deirdre's gains were minimal, whereas Jada made notable improvements in her language proficiency. Other studies report similar findings, with the implication that language progress is the result of continued emotional investment in language learning despite negative gendered experiences (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005; Brecht & Robinson, 1993; Wilkinson, 1998).

Although this study identified students' power to directly influence their own language gains through choosing continued emotional involvement rather than withdrawal, the students have the means to influence more than just their language gains. They have the potential to change not only the outcomes of events and their retrospective perceptions of events, but also to make choices that will minimize their exposure to uncomfortable or harmful incidents. An "inability or unwillingness to conform to local

norms in terms of dress, appearance, ways of speaking, and other ways of expressing gender…may contribute to this sense of rejection, reduced contact, and disappointment with the study abroad experience" (Churchill & Dufon, 2006, p.21).

Moreover, evidence supports the hypothesis that students who actively become socially involved in the target culture may develop strong friendships, which can help them maintain a positive outlook on the culture and overcome any negative feelings (Isabelli-Garcia, 2003; Kinginger & Whitworth, 2005; Pellegrino Aveni, 2005). These relationships largely facilitate the type of interaction that allows for language proficiency development. "Students who remained open to the target culture despite some unpleasant contacts and who developed close relationships with native-speaker peers were able to create social networks thus increasing their exposure to various situations and registers and advancing their language development" (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005, p.19). Findings suggest that at some point during their sojourn the students are faced with a choice. They can become upset about negative experiences and close off, or they can move toward accepting the situation and making the best of it. In other words, this type of experience can be viewed as a "potentially crucial turning point in the life stories of learners (rather than as the most acquisition-rich experience possible)…a time of choice…when emotional investment is either furthered and enhanced or withdrawn" (Kinginger & Whitworth, 2005, p. 5). Their choice will have an impact not only on the social opportunities available to them but also their ability to make language gains as a result.

The above-cited studies indicate that learners are autonomous, agentic individuals, who are constantly faced with moments of choice. They have the ability to act independently of external (or internal) pressures, which determinists would claim as

absolute limitations. According to Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001), learners should be

viewed as "people [with] human agency [who] actively engage in constructing the terms

and conditions of their own learning" (p. 145). A*gency* has been defined by Ahearn

(2001) as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (p. 112). This definition implies

an ecological approach to language learning, in which learners are agents socioculturally

influenced by their environment.

Despite the fact that language learners are capable of constructing their own

learning 'terms and conditions,' as Bown (2009) claims, many do not see themselves as

having control. However, internalizing and owning their personal autonomy can be

critical to maintaining intrinsic motivation (Bown, 2009), which in turn affects their

language progress (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005; Brecht & Robinson, 1993; Wilkinson, 1998).

Gender in the Middle East

Although there has been a significant amount of work on gendered linguistic issues

in study abroad contexts, to my knowledge there is very little dealing with these issues in

study abroad in the Middle East, where the gender gap is much more pronounced than in

the West. According to the Global Gender Gap Report by Hausman, Tyson, & Zahidi

(2010) in which women are compared to men according to the four categories of health,

education, politics, and economy, Egypt ranks 125th out of 134 countries, whereas the

United States ranks 19th. Indeed Arab gender norms and Western gender norms can be

classified into two dichotomous categories, which Westerners might term 'traditional'

and 'modern,' whereas Arabs would likely refer to them as 'traditional' and 'Western.'

Regardless of the terminology, the Arab world and the Western world are on opposite

ends of the spectrum in their treatment of gender, and according to Abu-Lughod (2010)

everyone in both worlds has an opinion about the issue.

Middle Eastern gender norms have been analyzed by Westerners as well as Arabs, and frequently from a political and/or feminist perspective that has focused on the patriarchal nature of Middle Eastern societies, which is often seen as oppressive (Naguib, 2005; Okkenhaug & Flaskerud, 2005; Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Kandiyoti, 1991; Meriwether & Tucker, 1999). However, over the last century Middle Eastern gender norms (such as veiling, exclusion of women from mosques, seclusion of women, gendered health practices, and so on) have seen some significant changes.

Kandiyoti's work (1991) depicts the historical changes in Egypt, where the differential gender norms were supported by a general assumption of Islamic justification. Eventually, through a state-launched emphasis on women's education, women understood more about their religion and began to challenge these assumptions. The effect eventually led to greater opportunities for education, opportunities for employment, and feminist consciousness.

The broad changes notwithstanding, Naguib (2005) states that patriarchy, as the foundation of all aspects of Arab society, is still the context through which the role of women is defined. And despite the increasing number of female-headed households in the Middle East, women are still left with a limited agency, unable to initiate action as men do. Women, like children, are expected to defer to their male relatives for support and protection, and the authority and decision-making power is still awarded to the husband, father, brother, or even sometimes uncles or male cousins (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001). However the local women do find ways of exercising their agency. "In spite of formal restrictions, Middle Eastern women have found various strategies to

informally exert power to shape their own status" (Okkenhaug & Flaskerud, 2005, pg. 1).

According to Ahmed (1992) women in Egypt have now occupied virtually all occupations except perhaps judge and head of state. In 1956 they were granted the right to vote, and in 1962 a national charter was approved declaring that women and men should be treated equally in the workforce, although this was easier published than realized. Moreover, equal treatment in the workforce has not necessarily led to equal treatment in other arenas. For example, with regards to family law, men are allowed an easy divorce, and though the option of divorce has become easier for women as of late, it is not nearly as easy as it is for men (Meriwether & Tucker, 1999). Ahmed (1992) also points out that differential modes of dress are still very common, particularly veiling (covering the head), despite the fact that over a century ago Egyptians began openly petitioning for unveiling, with lobbyists including not only women, but also nationalist men. In fact in 1899 it was a Muslim judge, Qasim Amin, who wrote *The Liberation of Woman*, calling for the abolishing of the veil, which began the veiling controversy that continues today, over one hundred years later (Ahmed, 1992).

Although most Arabs are Muslim, there are also a number of other large religious groups in the Middle East, including Christians. Jansen (2005) claims that the recent changes in women's roles have taken place for Coptic (Christian) women as well as Muslim women, stating also that the change presents difficulties in addition to benefits. The modern middle-class Coptic girl has greater opportunities for education, employment, and access to local spaces than her "illiterate, home-oriented, economically dependent" mother (pg. 149), but she is also confronted with the necessity to fit into prescribed gender roles despite these new situations, which presents a sort of paradoxical

challenge. Societal and familial resistance to her failure to fit into this paradoxical role is aggravated further by the fact that she takes away scholarships and jobs that were traditionally given to men.

Middle Eastern society and family are not the only groups unsatisfied with the current state of gender. Westerners and outsiders have long viewed gender issues (such as the veil and women's seclusion) with a critical eye, labeling Middle Eastern societies as oppressive, immoral, and inferior (Ahmed, 1992), but it is important to remember that not all native Middle Eastern women feel oppressed. According to Joseph and Slyomovics (2001) most women and children endorse patriarchal relationships because of the support they provide. And although some Arab women do feel that wearing the veil is an oppressive custom, others welcome it as liberating camouflage (Ahmed, 1992). Nevertheless Westerners frequently perceive these practices as very different, disagreeable, and foreign to their own culture. As Ahmed (1992) puts it, "The peculiar practices of Islam with respect to women had always formed part of the Western narrative of the quintessential otherness and inferiority of Islam" (pg. 149). Regardless of the perspectives of local women, Western women often do look on these 'peculiar practices' and perceive them as inferior or frightening. Such an opinion, if held by Western female students on study abroad in the Middle East, would greatly affect their perceptions and experiences. Since so little research on the topic exists to date, the present study will explore gender issues on study abroad in Cairo, Egypt

Methods

Qualitative methods were chosen for this study because they are particularly appropriate for uncovering participants' perspectives of their diverse experiences. Qualitative inquiry is particularly suited to uncovering a detailed view of participants' thoughts and emotions (Creswell, 1998), as well as the uniqueness of each student's sojourn abroad.

Participants for the study were the women in a convenience sample of students, data sources included participant observation and interviews with the female students, and data analysis was performed progressively according to inductively identified common themes.

Participants

The participants for the study were sixteen female students including the researcher, as well as approximately thirty-five male students, involved in the Brigham Young University intensive Arabic program in Cairo, Egypt during Spring and Summer terms 2010. In addition to the fifteen female students who had been through four semesters of Brigham Young University's Arabic language program, one female student from the University of California, Berkeley attended the study abroad.

Of the fifteen female students ranging in age from twenty to twenty-nine, ethnographic interviews were administered to twelve (as well as the wife of one of the male students). Data presented here include narratives from eleven of these students. These narratives were chosen because the experiences were more representative of the group as a whole. In many cases, when there were a number of similar accounts available, narratives were chosen based on the richness of their data. For example, if five

students agreed upon a similar opinion, I chose the two narratives that covered the topic in greatest depth, or that presented alternative expressions of a similar idea.

Data Sources

I recorded participant observations in the form of fieldnotes during my time in Egypt with the students. A part of these accounts deals with the daily activities of the students, but the major focus is on gender-related issues. Any commentary made by the students in relation to gender was recorded in these fieldnotes.

In addition to participant observation, I conducted individual interviews with the students toward the end of the study abroad program. The students were still on study abroad in Egypt, but I had already returned to the United States. Thus these interviews were conducted and recorded over the Internet using Skype. Although I had intended to interview all of the female students, three of them were unable to complete their scheduled interviews for various personal reasons.

Each interview, conducted solely in English, began with an open-ended grand tour question, which allows students to "set the direction of the interview" (Siegle, 2002). Interviews then developed based on the response given by the student. Thus, the majority of the informal interview was student-directed, focusing on aspects of the overall experience that were most salient to each individual. Interview questions varied significantly from person to person for two reasons, (a) the direction of the interview was determined by the student's responses, and (b) in the search for confirming or disconfirming evidence I guided the students to address common issues that had been brought up by students in previous interviews. It became apparent during the interview process that students commonly faced challenges with finding appropriate speaking

partners, adhering to program guidelines, and avoiding harassment. Therefore, in subsequent interviews when the students did not independently offer the information, I occasionally brought up these themes or guided the students to comment on these issues in order to compare their experiences with those of the students in the early interviews.

Procedure

Interviews with a small number of male students were included in order to bring a certain amount of perspective to the experiences of the female students. However, male students were not equally included because I was not looking at comparing the actual experiences of females to males; rather I was interested in the individual experiences of the females. I was particularly interested in the facts of their gendered experiences, and even more interested in their perceptions of and reactions to their experiences. The most salient question was, "What is the subjective experience of a female student in the Middle East?" Thus, I did not include an equal number of interviews with the men, because the information of greatest value was that which would reveal the women's perceptions of their experiences.

Following the program and the completion of all the interviews, the interviews were transcribed and analyzed according to themes which I had distinguished in the text. These themes were chosen inductively, rather than pre-imposed on the data. This was a progressive analysis, with adjustments being made continuously to the various motifs based on the narrative data. As the analysis process progressed I made changes to the themes, comparing the interviews with the observations, and then separating the themes into subcategories. Following this process, I identified quotations that represented the viewpoints in each of these subcategories.

During my time in Egypt, I refrained from discussing the focus of my thesis and data collection with the other students in order to keep from changing their perceptions of gender-related issues. My hope was that any commentary they made about gender would be the result of their own ideas and conclusions, rather than an idea that was inadvertently planted in their minds as I discussed my research. I did not want to make them sensitive to something that they would not otherwise notice, or make them perceive a difference that did not really exist. However, in later consideration, I came to the conclusion that the students were already made extremely aware of gender (as they had to be due to the nature of the gender roles in the country), and I probably could not have made them any more so.

Setting

All of the students involved in the study, with the exception of the student from Berkeley, had completed four semesters of Arabic study at Brigham Young University. The program was comprised of a demanding series of courses, which called for many hours of study per week. Thus the participants in Cairo had worked hard for at least two years simply to satisfy eligibility requirements for the program, which suggests that learning Arabic was a high priority for the learners.

During the semester before their departure, one of the administrators interviewed each of the students, ensuring that they all knew what was expected of them and what they were getting into. The interviewer informed the female students of the kind of treatment they could expect as women and of the best way to react to this treatment. I was told during my interview that 30% of female students on these programs are sexually assaulted. That is, they are not just harassed or verbally assaulted; they are inappropriately touched or groped. The actual statistics for our group will be discussed further in a later chapter.

In addition to being interviewed by one of the study abroad administrators, all of the students who wished to attend the study abroad were required to attend a preparatory course, which met once a week for approximately seven weeks during the semester prior to departure. In this course the students were instructed specifically as to what to wear, how to act, whom to interact with, and so on while in Egypt. The instructions were gender specific, with most of the instructions directed toward the women in order to help them avoid sexual harassment.

A number of studies have confirmed the fact that female study abroad participants often have negative encounters with the opposite sex, citing harassment as a frequent issue. The problem of sexual harassment appears to be particularly acute in Egypt. According to a 2008 survey of 1,010 women conducted by the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights, 98 percent of foreign women and 83 percent of Egyptian women reported having been sexually harassed (Petri, 2011). Numerous cases of sexual harassment and assault are now documented on the website HarassMap, where local women are able to report incidents of harassment (i.e. jokes, catcalls, comments, ogling, and so on), sexual assault, and even rape ("Harrassmap," n.d.).

In consideration of the high percentages of harassment, administrators stressed gender-specific instructions during the preparatory course. For example, the females were told to wear baggy clothes, not to smile at men or walk near them, and not to be alone with a man. The males were told that it is not considered socially acceptable to talk to women, so their chances of finding female speaking partners would be less likely. In short, the concept of gender was discussed in great detail before the students even left the U.S. Thus students became sensitized to issues of gender well before their study abroad experience.

On the very first day in Egypt, an incident occurred which caused even greater gender awareness: one of the female students, Cindy[i], was on the metro with a number of others from her cohort. A group of young men was walking onto the train when she and her group went to leave. Cindy later reported that as she was exiting the train, one of the young men touched her genital area. She was sexually assaulted in broad daylight with members of her group nearby.

The American administrator spoke with the entire group that evening, emphasizing the importance of the rules and guidelines that had already been explained, and using this first incident as an example of the seriousness of his injunction. What is more, a few days later the topic was discussed even further: another authority based in Cairo spoke to the students about the same issues. As with the pre-departure interview, the preparatory course, and the first day's lecture, the directions were aimed at the women in particular. He spoke to the women about how to look and act and so on, using another example of sexual assault to drive the issue home.

Based on comments students made, these incidents and warnings appeared to affect them. After hearing in the initial interview that 30% of female students on study abroad are groped, I wrote in my notes, "It is hard as a female to hear that kind of statistic and not be a little concerned. I know that I may be perceived as paranoid, but I also believe that it probably protects me." I believed that if I continued to be paranoid then I would be one of the other 70%: 'safe.' My perceptions at the time may provide insights into possible perceptions of the other female students. If my reactions were any indication of the norm, the study abroad began with high gender awareness on the students' part.

During the first few days, the students were given a few assignments: begin making native-speaking friends (speaking partners), familiarize themselves with Cairo, and find a place to live. Once these first few days had passed, the core of the program began. The students began attending classes at the Hedayet Institute for Arabic Studies. Three different classes a day of two hours each, totaled thirty hours of instruction per week. They had been split into four groups according to their proficiency (determined by their scores on a midterm administered during the previous semester), and they attended

classes with the other members of their groups. In addition to these classes and the accompanying homework, they also had a newspaper reading requirement and a speaking requirement: the students had to read the newspaper for two hours a day, then complete an assignment (a series of questions about the articles), as well as speak for two hours in Arabic with a native speaker, which speaking time they reported at the end of the day in an online speaking log. As part of the speaking log, they were required to rate their speaking according to the proficiency levels assessed in a formal OPI (Swender, 1999). In other words, they would estimate the amount of time spent speaking, as well as the level of their speech: Beginning, Intermediate, Advanced, or Superior.

They were informed that these requirements were laid out as preparation for assessments which would be administered at the end of the study abroad: during the final week of the program, the students' progress, as well as their grades, would be measured by their performance on a number of tests: a written, newspaper test, a vocabulary test, and a formal OPI.

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[i] All names included herein are pseudonyms. The participants' names have been changed in order to ensure their anonymity.

Findings

The female students reported overall satisfaction with the experience abroad. With the exception of a few rare students, whose comments were markedly negative, the students had a very positive program of study. This notwithstanding, the students placed significant emphasis on the stress they were experiencing. Self-reported stress is not unique to students in the Middle East . Study abroad in general presents a number of challenges for students (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005), who have to minimize the conflict (whether internal or external) between expectations and reality, and as with any foreign study program, the students in this program identified a long list of stressors: culture shock, homework demands, interpersonal conflicts, identity crises, and so on.

Students felt pressure from a wide array of sources. They felt pressure to improve in the language, to earn a good grade, and to motivate themselves to talk to people in situations where they would not have felt comfortable approaching people in English, much less a second language. They felt limited in their ability to express themselves and as a result often felt a loss of personality because they could not make jokes or interact intellectually. Students reported stress from homework demands, roommate problems, relationship problems, and it is likely that there are still other issues that they may not have expressed. In short the students were dealing with much more than just learning a language; they were dealing with all sorts of personal, psychological, and social issues. In this section we will be dealing with a few of the challenges reported by the students: the challenges most salient to gender research.

Interaction

In personal interviews the women in our study reported a number of challenges in their social interactions with Egyptians, and because the students were required to speak with them for at least two hours every day, these challenges made for persistent trials. The obstacles to interaction mediated by gender were related to the social unavailability of men due to interactive social norms, physical unavailability of women, limited advanced-level discourse, conversational unresponsiveness of the women who were available, limiting program restrictions, and issues of physical safety, which restricted the situations in which they could interact with native speakers. While the men may have experienced a number of these as well, these were the challenges the women reported facing during their time in Cairo.

Physical availability. Our students reported frustration with Egyptian women's inaccessibility, indicating that it was more difficult for them to find female interlocutors, simply because women were not out in the open. They were not physically available. They claimed that although Egyptian men often interacted socially in the streets, the women were less visible. Thus, despite the fact that the male and female students were interacting in the same locations, the affordances granted to the men and women were significantly different. Annabeth felt that this put her at a disadvantage, particularly because she had been instructed to avoid men and search out women. Nevertheless, Egyptian women were not so easy to locate. She describes through her own eyes the challenge of tracking down female Egyptian speaking partners:

Sometimes I think it's a lot harder if you're a girl because a lot of girls here they don't hang out on the streets. Like they have certain places to hang out

and so it is a little harder to approach a girl on the street and they're a little less receptive.

For Annabeth, being a woman created the added challenge of discovering the locations the Egyptian woman frequented, and although she was afforded the option of approaching the few who were out in the open, she asserted that these observable women did not seem to welcome an approach. Annabeth claimed that most Egyptian women gather out of the public eye, and the women she did encounter were not receptive to her attempts to draw them into a conversation, although she does not suggest why. Annabeth's experience demonstrates that access to language learning opportunities was mediated both by her own gender and by the broader norms dictating the roles of women in Egypt. The implication is that male students on the other hand, had access to male Egyptian speaking partners who were routinely visible, walking and interacting on the streets.

Social availability. The social norms of a culture influence both the way the people of that culture conceptualize the world and the way they interact with the world. As Lantolf & Thorne (2006) state, "culturally constructed meaning is the primary means that humans use to organize and control their mental functioning" (pg.1). Therefore the students had to deal with the challenge of merging their American ideas of appropriate sociocultural interaction with the somewhat unfamiliar ideas of appropriate Egyptian interaction, which was further complicated by the program's two-hour speaking requirement. The students commented frequently on the internal conflict they experienced between knowing they should approach strangers to speak, and feeling the impact of the growing

American tendency to avoid socializing (Putnam, 2000). Nevertheless, the women pushed themselves to overcome their own cultural social norms (i.e. interacting politely with strangers, smiling at people when they approach, treating men and women with the same amiability), only to experience the challenges that result from Egyptian social norms. More than just being physically inaccessible, Egyptian interlocutors were also socially unavailable: according to gender norms in-country, it is inappropriate for women to speak with men, and vice versa, unless both parties are either married to each other, or related by blood. Social norms dictated appropriate and inappropriate interlocutors; therefore, Western women's opportunities for interaction in Egypt were limited if they were to conform to Egyptian cultural standards.

Amber admitted disappointment with observation of these norms, not only because it limited her speaking opportunities, but also because in choosing to follow these norms she felt restricted in her cultural exploration of public domain:

> There are times when I think, 'Man, I wish I could just feel comfortable just going up and talking to these men, like normal,' you know what I mean?…The only thing that I get frustrated about sometimes is like, sometimes there is a time where I'd like to just sit down with those old men over there and talk to them and see what they're doing...'cause that seems like a really important part of their culture that I don't get to experience as much.

A male student in her position may have been afforded the chance of engaging these men in conversation as well as gaining insight into their culture, insight which Amber might never have acquired due to her gender and the local social norms.

Many students felt that the social norms were an equalizer in some ways. Since men were only supposed to talk with men, and women were only supposed to talk with women, some students maintained that both genders had equal opportunities. Brooke explains, "Like it's fine, like if I'm getting a lot of Arabic spoken with only speaking to women. I don't see why a guy couldn't have the same experience with just other guys, you know?"

Her comments reflected that she decided not to take issue with the way Egyptian gender norms influence the students' speaking opportunities. Her decision is evidence of the agency students can apply in individual situations, thereby controlling their emotional reactions to the affordances they are dealt. She was not concerned that she could not (or should not) speak with native Egyptian men. This notwithstanding, she also acknowledged the fact that the Egyptian men were not in any way *opposed* to speaking with the American women. On the contrary, the female students got a lot of attention from the Egyptian men. This attention was seen as a positive factor by some students, and a negative factor by others. In fact, most students maintained that female students had an advantage because of this element, claiming that women had access to interlocutors of both genders, whereas men only had access to the men. As Annabeth observed, "Even I can go up to an Egyptian man, I mean like it's not the safest thing to do, but you can still…but it's a lot harder for guys to approach a girl—like, it's less acceptable." The students realized that the male students would never approach an Arab woman because they know it is inappropriate, but the Arab men approach the female students nonetheless. Thus female students have opportunities to speak with both genders, but male students can only speak to men. Brooke corroborated this theory, "I think that men

are—like the women are happy to talk to you, but the men are like ecstatic to talk to you, and…so I think that's definitely true, but at the same time it's not smart to talk to the men. Like, it really. It really isn't."

According to Brooke, her environment in Cairo afforded her many more opportunities to talk with men than with women, but she chose not to take advantage of them. In the interest of safety, she resolved to follow the cultural norms of appropriateness by limiting her speaking partners to women. She chose to accept the rules and work within them by taking advantage of the positive opportunities afforded her.

However, it was not uncommon for the students to ignore the cultural norms. In different environments, students chose different ways of interacting, particularly when the men were Christian rather than Muslim. Take Kathleen for instance. Her reflections echoed Annabeth's: "I really liked talking to Copts [Christians]. I felt so much more comfortable with them than I did with the Muslims. I talked to guys and it was no big deal. I really enjoyed…I felt like it was the first time I could really be me." Not only did she feel comfortable and safe, but she also felt like herself among them. For Kathleen the Coptic environment provided her with more than just male speaking partners. It represented a place where she could relax without worrying about whether she was acting appropriately. Melissa's account confirms the idea.

> Just because the male/female dynamic in the Christian community is so
> different. Like, um, young girls and guys our age interact all the time. And
> it's still kind of like—it's still different than Americans interacting
> together, like there's still like this sexual tension or whatever, but…they're
> more comfortable hanging out…So I mean you—you do get to see both

sides of the coin. But I've only noticed that in the Christian communities

because they're more comfortable guys and girls interacting.

She interacted weekly with the Christian youth, where she was able to

speak to both men and women equally without any awkwardness. In these

situations she experienced a minimization of the internal conflict between her

American cultural norms and Egyptian cultural expectations. However, it did not

eliminate her frustration with gendered speaking altogether. She continued her

commentary, making it clear that there were still issues with talking with the

Coptic Christian men and women.

> Almost every time I've gone to hang out with them, like, the girls just
>
> flock to the boys in the program. And it was like, kind of frustrating.
>
> Actually, it was really frustrating at the beginning…because there would be
>
> this one boy and he would bring his girlfriends. And so I would talk to the
>
> boy, but the girls, like, wouldn't even talk to me. Cause they would only
>
> talk to like, Greg and Matt and like, Harry…I remember one time it was
>
> particularly frustrating. Cause Greg was like, 'I don't know why you and
>
> Susan don't talk to these girls more often.' He's like, 'I talk to them almost
>
> every day and they're like, super friendly.' Like, he was trying to be
>
> helpful. But Susan and I got so mad and we were like, 'That's because they
>
> love talking to you. They don't talk to us.' You know?…And the girls—the
>
> Christian girls are a little more, like, forward, I guess with the American
>
> boys in our group, probably just cause that's more acceptable in their
>
> communities. Whereas, I feel like a Muslim girl—it's way less acceptable.

Interestingly enough, Melissa was frustrated because the Christian women talked with the American men. It was not enough for her to be able to comfortably talk to men, she wanted to be able to interact with both genders. According to her, the gender norms that prevented mixed-gender interaction in greater Cairo were not characteristic of the smaller Christian community, meaning that she was now able to talk to the men without making a spectacle. However, the women were no longer very interested in talking to her when her male colleagues were present. She found in the Coptic environment that Egyptian women were inaccessible despite the fact that they were physically present. Perhaps she had become accustomed to the social norms, which restricted her to speaking exclusively with women, and felt frustrated to have her world, which she had just re-solidified in her mind, transform again.

Availability of advanced-level discourse. The students had to be able to talk about a variety of topics on multiple levels in order to do well on their OPIs, and without varied speaking practice, they would never develop those essential advanced skills.

Although a number of women avoided men and their advances, one female student, Martha, eventually decided to specifically target male speaking partners, because she felt that they were open to advanced-level conversational topics, whereas women were not. That is, she felt it was more difficult to get women to talk about serious or intellectually challenging subjects (a feeling that was shared by a few other students). Susan associated the difficulty with religion. She felt that Muslim women were more difficult to engage in meaningful conversation than

were Christian women, "I felt like Muslim women didn't really want to talk to me, like, it was hard for me to start up a conversation with them."

 For Martha, the difference in discourse was more about personality and character than it was about religion. Martha said she felt that the women in Cairo were shallow. She struggled to get them to talk about politics, current events, and other topics that she felt were important. According to Martha, she could talk with any Arab woman as long as she were willing to talk about men or makeup, but the conversation was fairly one-sided if she tried to discuss other subjects.

A number of other women shared this concern, but it is important to note that not all of them were united in this opinion. Martha and a minority of the students reported a difficulty with getting Egyptian women to talk about serious topics, but this minority had a critical cause for complaint: small talk does not get you far on the OPI.

Granted, Egyptian men, as noted previously, were generally more than willing to engage the American women in conversation, but most of the American women did not take advantage of the opportunities to converse with them. The topics of conversation were not varied enough for most of the women to justify approaching the men against the counsel of the program. Thus, most women chose to encourage local Egyptian women to talk about topics of lesser interest (advanced-level topics) rather than address the men, regardless of the countless opportunities they had to do so. Brooke admitted:

> If I wanted I could get like 12 hours of speaking every day, just going and putting
> myself out there in the streets, being like, hey guys! Come talk to me! But it

would be a very unproductive conversation because you're feeling so awkward about how they're like, staring at you or what they're saying to you…um, and the whole time you're trying to concoct lies to get around their invitations for marriage…

So yeah, I guess it has its advantages, but it's not an advantage any girl— any smart girl—would take advantage of. You know? Like it's just, it's not a smart thing to do. And I think like, even with the guys, like, yeah maybe they shouldn't talk to the women either…I think it's fair. I think there are definitely disadvantages to being a girl in such a crazy society like this, but I mean, the women here learn how to cope with it.

Brooke makes a connection similar to what was found in the Polanyi (1995) study, in which women in Russia had to learn how to refuse men's advances. In Brooke's case, her time speaking with men was spent "trying to concoct lies to get around their invitations for marriage," and although she was provided plenty of chances to broaden her vocabulary, to utilize these affordances would not have assisted her in developing varied conversational skills, rather a 'hot-house' special on the topic of eluding marriage proposals (Swender, 1999).

Brittany tells a similar tale to Brooke's: she, too, commented on the qualitative difference between the kinds of conversations they had as women, and the kinds of conversations she believes they could have had as men. She recounts, "I was in a store with Brooke and Alan in Kahn Al Khalili and there was a guy there and he was asking if like I was married or if I was single and asking for my phone number and whatnot. But

like, if I were a guy he would be asking me if I wanted to go play soccer with him sometime. You know?"

The nature of Brooke's and Brittany's conversations with men were markedly different from what they would have been if they had been speaking with women, or if they themselves had been men. Although most of the students seemed to agree that the women were at an advantage because of the social availability of both genders, according to these narratives this 'advantage' is not so advantageous. If our female students spent all their time speaking to men, the way these stories tell it, they would be avoiding unwelcome advances and marriage proposals. They would surely develop the vocabulary and linguistic ability to manage the challenges that come in these types of situations, but as Polanyi (1995) observed, these are not generally the types of skills that promise success on the OPI.

Program restrictions. In addition to having fewer accessible speaking partners readily available (and fewer still who might be willing to talk about serious issues), the women also had fairly restrictive time limitations. They had been instructed not to be out after dark unless they had a male 'bodyguard' of sorts. Without an escort, they were not allowed out of their house after dark. Whereas the male students had enhanced opportunities for interaction as a result of an unrestricted schedule, programmatic restrictions limited the women in a number of ways. For example,

1. If they were already out and speaking with someone, they had to cut it short in order to be home by dark.

2. If they were at home and it was nearing sunset, they were faced with the choice of either not going out (and subsequently not fulfilling the requirements of the homework assignment) or petitioning one of the men to accompany them.

 3. If they chose to call one of the men in the program, they often worried about disturbing them, and many times elected to stay home just because they did not want to pester and annoy.

4. If they were invited to an activity that they knew required a lot of travel time, or a lot of time in general, they frequently had to turn down the invitation simply because they knew they would not be home before dark or could not find an escort.

5. A lot of Egyptians tend to stay up late, and socializing happens at a later hour. Thus, in many cases their friends often did not even begin to mingle until after dark.

In reference to the added difficulty that women face because of greater time restrictions, Annabeth commented, "It's cooler at night especially during the summer so that's when they go hang out and shop and stuff like that. So I think as a girl unless you're willing to get a guy to go with you, you do miss out on part of the culture, 'cause Cairo really does come alive at night."

Amber's impressions mirrored Annabeth's. She confided, "The whole, like, trying to have to always have a guy with you at night and things like that. That's a disadvantage because sometimes you have to plan your whole day around that, you know?" She was frustrated by the advanced planning required of the women, who had to have a man with them after dark.

Melissa reported a similar frustration: she also felt the time constraint was a challenge; one day she was invited to go out to a coffee shop about a half an hour from her apartment, but since the group was not going until nine or ten, she chose to decline the invitation. Although she needed to socialize in order to fulfill the program requirements, it was not realistic to travel a long distance in order to interact, particularly when the activity was supposed to commence at the very time she would have to be back home if she were to follow the guidelines set out by the administration for her safety.

Physical safety.

"Even I can go up to an Egyptian man, I mean like it's not the safest thing to do, but you can." –Annabeth

The gender of the female students on study abroad also affected their sense of safety in a variety of interactions. In particular, the women in this study were subjected to sexual harassment, both verbal and physical. Their physical safety, then, was frequently in question as they struggled to create a safe environment where they were free from harassment and assault.

Of the women whose information was available, 10 out of 14 women were sexually assaulted. However, a number of these women were assaulted two or three times, making the total count of reported assault incidents 16. This means that the average female student in our study was sexually assaulted more than once. It is surprising to note that despite the fact that 71% of the women were sexually assaulted, none of them seems to have been particularly traumatized, at least not to the extent that it caused evident enduring distress. Three of the women were not able to keep their interview appointments; therefore, the assault statistics are not based on the entire group, rather they are based on the information available through the individual interviews.

Harassment. Women on the program were counseled not to speak with Egyptian men, just as the male students were counseled not to speak with women. The counsel for the female students was meant to protect them from possible sexual harassment (unwanted or inappropriate comments, catcalling, and so on) and assault (unwanted touching of private areas, which for the purpose the study are here defined as the breasts, buttocks, and genital areas).

Moreover, this counsel reflects the norms of social interaction in the target culture. The guidelines were laid down because the harassment and assault of women are frequent issues within Egyptian society. In response to the problem, Egyptian women have created "Harassmap", an Internet site where women can pinpoint the location of an attack in order to better inform other women about safe and unsafe districts. Clearly Egypt is a society where harassment appears endemic, and is part of the gendered experience of living in the country. Notwithstanding their awareness of the high rates of harassment and assault, the students in the program chose to participate. Their desire to learn the language and culture prevailed over the concern they might have had, and they chose to pursue foreign study in Cairo. Nevertheless, they knew they might have to deal with such an event sometime, at which point the focus changed. It was no longer *if* they would have to deal with harassment and assault, but rather *how* they would choose to deal with it.

Ashley and her husband Leo were both students in the program, and therefore were able to interact appropriately together in public according to social norms. She was a victim of verbal harassment, even in the presence of her husband, yet she was unperturbed by the behavior. She had traveled widely and

therefore associated these inappropriate remarks and proposals with typical tourist

treatment across the globe:

> In any tourist area I think you definitely get remarks, like people like to say things
>
> about camels[ii] and funny things and like, you're beautiful, and whatnot. But like, I
>
> definitely got proposed to a few times and that was weird and that was even when
>
> Leo was with me, with them knowing that we were married so I mean, those were
>
> like, weird, inappropriate things, but I think it's like you realize that it's going to
>
> happen, and as long as like, I never felt like, that didn't really affect my trip there,
>
> so like, I wasn't upset by it.

She acknowledges that the harassment was weird and inappropriate, but it

did not prevent her from continuing to associate with native speakers. She knew it

was going to happen, and decided not to get upset about it. Ashley committed

herself to maintaining a positive affect, acting as agent for her own affective

processing (the way she mentally processed her own emotions), and therefore was

not agitated by these "weird, inappropriate things."

A number of single female students decided to disregard the

administrators' counsel and engage men in speaking. The women on the program

found it hard to abide by the Egyptian rules of interaction, claiming that following

such stringent rules was against their nature. For instance, Brooke reported, "That's

like more in my nature to—to talk with people and to acknowledge them, I mean

just to be—to be civil, to be polite."

 Brooke claims this inclination to be open and friendly as part of her nature,

but also associates it with her own sociocultural ideas of civility and politeness.

Her preferred communication style was born of the years she spent in her own culture; she felt the necessity to act according to the conditioning of her society. This is evidence that the students continued to allow their American culture to govern their behavior, rather than accept local sociocultural ideas about how to act as women. Whereas Egyptian women would generally avoid eye contact with men, American women are inclined to be friendly with them.

However, negative interactions did convince many of the American female students to limit interactions with men. Stephanie reported having engaged more men than women in speaking, but ultimately had to stop visiting a number of them because they were "creepers." She was threatened by their behavior and decided not to visit them anymore.

Some of the women on the program found a way to merge their preferred communication style with the need for safety precautions: they found that interactions with older men tended to be safer. As a strategy to protect themselves from the threat of harassment, students ultimately distinguished between men of various ages, taking chances with older men and avoiding younger men. Stephanie acted warily when it came to young men, but openly interacted with older men:

> It's a little frustrating just cause, you know you—you have to be careful
> because the guys here, you know, they have no self-control…it's not the
> old guys, though, like cause I feel like the old men, you know, some of
> them are really nice and really sweet, but, you've just got some of these
> younger guys who have nothing else better to do in their lives than stare at
> foreign women and be creepy.

Many of the women used similar tactics based on the age of the men, particularly over time, as the women felt more at ease in their surroundings. Whereas initially these women avoided all men, later on they chose to differentiate between men of various ages, socializing comfortably with older men. For instance, Brooke reflected on the change she saw in herself:

I'm more comfortable here. Um...recently, just in the past few days, um...like a couple men, like older men, they'll see me walking down the road and they'll just say like 'Hello!' Or 'Good morning!' You know? Like they'll say something. And this whole time I've been ignoring that from all ages of men, like I don't even care and I just ignore it, but lately like, some of the little boys and older men, I like...I'm starting to respond to them. I think it's just cause I'm starting to feel more comfortable here, and I'm so used to it that I'm like 'Oh!' I'll say hello. I'll be friendly….But it kinda makes me laugh cause I'm like, I—this is engrained in me not to talk to these people. Why am I starting to want to talk to them? So, I don't know. It's kind of weird…Yeah, there's definitely an age range, like from, like 10...to 40? Hehehe! That I don't talk to.

Melissa's account coincides with Brooke's. Her comments confirm the idea that it was 'safe' to talk to older men, but not younger ones, 'I guess the guys in our program can't really talk to women so it's that same problem. But we—we really can't talk to men unless they're older, I've found…At least, I haven't. At all.'

Many women developed discomfort with younger Egyptian men, identifying men of this particular age group as the people responsible for acts of harassment or assault. It came as a surprise for Brittany, who said, 'Ok, like there's harassment in Egypt, but I thought it was going to come from older men you know? But… my experience is it was like, a lot of it comes from the younger kids, like even 12 years old.' Likewise, Kathleen said of an experience with one young man, 'I don't know if [it] makes any sense, but…But I think it's just those middle-school ages that you seem to have more trouble with anyway.'

As we will discuss further later on, the issue of the age of the men responsible for these incidents is a recurring theme. Their age seems to be a factor in determining the extent to which the women deal lightly or heavily with their negative experiences.

Catcalling, flirtation, and hissing, although commonplace, were not the most significant gender issues faced by the female students of our program. These were mild in comparison to the kinds of situations faced by most of the female participants, who were groped (sexually assaulted) in public. Moreover, a number of the students were attacked more than once.

Assault. On February 11, 2001 CBS News' chief foreign affairs correspondent Lara Logan was covering the events on Tahrir Square in Cairo, when she was "ripped away from her producer and bodyguard by a group of men who tore at her clothes and groped and beat her body. 'For an extended period of time, they raped me with their hands,' Ms. Logan said…She estimated that the attack involved 200 to 300 men. She said, 'When women are harassed and subjected to this in society, they're denied an equal

place in that society. Public spaces don't belong to them. Men control it.'" (Stelter,

2011).

The harassment and assault of women is not only the result of different

affordances, but according to Ms. Logan is also the cause of them. She claimed that the

threat of harassment and assault prevents women from interacting in public with the same

freedom and in the same locations as men. The environment affords them fewer

opportunities for socializing without risk. Such was the case with the students in Cairo,

who reported frequent incidents of assault.

One of the most serious incidents reported by female study abroad participants

involved Kathleen, who was attacked at the celebration of al-layla al-kabira at the

mosque of Sayyida Zaynab. Although the students were warned that the celebration was

known for the lewd behavior of its party-goers, and required to bring at least four men for

every woman, she was not able to prevent the following experience:

> It was such a mob of Arab men that when, yeah, like it was sort of like being
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> attacked by, like ten guys at once…so I got out of that situation really fast because
>
> there was some older Arab men that helped me out, but it was a little bit scary just
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> because there were so many of them, and they were all grabbing for me at the
>
> same time… at the time I was a little bit frightened…because there were so many
>
> of them.

She realized the gravity of the situation as a number of men attempted to attack

her at the same time. When she realized she might not come away physically and

mentally in one piece, she wanted to get out of there. However, if it had not been for the

help of a few protective older men, the situation could have turned out much more

gravely. Kathleen was fortunate to leave the celebration with rare self-possession. The incident could have gone horribly wrong.

It calls to mind the related incident in Tahrir Square, where Ms. Logan was attacked. The severity of her experience has drawn considerable attention from the media. Not all of the students' experiences with assault were as severe as Kathleen's and Ms. Logan's, although a number of them are worthy of attention and all of them are far from harmless. Brittany tells an account of one of her experiences with assault that left her quite upset:

> One time, I was on the bridge walking home from school and there was like, this boy was like looking down from the bridge, like there's a motorcycle bridge and there was–he was going up on the bridge. So when I was walking up, he grabbed me and started grabbing me and trying to feel and I was just so shocked I didn't even know what to do. Like I was pushing him off and…I ran away. And he got on his bike and followed me home…I think he was like thirteen…And like I didn't yell at him or anything. I just like was so shocked. I was like, I need to get away from here…
>
> Yeah, but then um...thank goodness there was like a motorcycle that was coming up on the bridge and the moment he saw that he like he let go and…I ran away after that…Like, at first, like when I got down I was really shooken up like, that was probably the worst—like people will say things on the street to you and whatnot, but like that I mean, it's just worse, like when someone has to like grab you...I just like got home and was like "I can't believe this. Why do people do this? Like he's 12 years old!" Like when I was 12 years old I didn't even—I barely

liked boys. Like why? Like why is he thinking like this? Like where does he get this at such a young age? You know?

The young man had stopped her, and held her there, preventing her from leaving, until another man came by on a motorcycle and only then did he let her go. Brittany's case goes beyond groping to physical restraint. These are cases of negative experiences afforded to American female students. Their female gender mediated their experiences, not only limiting their access to language learning opportunities, but even making them subject to violence.

As a graduate student, I went on the program in order to fulfill certain requirements for my degree, as well as to collect data for this study. However, as a student, I was required to attend the classes, do the homework, and complete the newspaper and speaking requirements. I was on my way to the club one day in order to fulfill both requirements, walking in a very well-lit, familiar area around eleven in the morning, when a man reached out of a passing car and grabbed my buttocks from behind.

Despite my efforts at following the guidelines set out by the administration to dress modestly, avoid making eye contact, avoid traveling at night, and so forth, I was unable to prevent the occurrence. These events make it clear that there is cause for concern, both because they occur despite attempts at prevention and because they may have more serious implications for the ways students need to be prepared to handle their many challenges with interaction.

Reactions

As time went on, some of our students began to avoid the speaking responsibility. When faced with numerous deterrents (inhibition, inaccessibility of speaking partners, lack of

safety in interaction, and so on), some students stopped making an effort to fulfill the speaking requirement. Luckily for a number of these students, the program provided the occasional personal tutor as a substitute for the established speaking requirement. This option was offered to the students who seemed to struggle the most. All of the students who were given this opportunity reflected positively on the experience. The other students, those who were not given the opportunity to work with a tutor, continued to do their best to meet the minimum 2-hour requirement. Students found various methods for locating interlocutors, for engaging them in conversation, and for coping when an attempt at interaction ended in harassment or assault.

Gaining access to native speakers. Students explored creative options in order to discover ideal locations for socializing with women, demonstrating one of the qualities of successful learners described by Bown (2009): "they actively sought or created experiences that would facilitate acquisition" (p. 575). One of these options was a *naadi*, a sports club of sorts, to which the students had been given access. This club was a dependable solution for a number of students. There were always women there, whether employees or middle- to upper-class club members, and the students could always count on finding someone to speak with.

Other students report going often to a beauty salon, or other places where women are known to congregate. And still others spent time on the metro, which had a reserved section, a women's car, where only women were allowed to ride. In these locations the students could talk freely in a place where neither the students nor the natives had to worry about safety or propriety. They learned to count on the

fact that women were always present in these locales, and it helped them overcome the issue of availability.

In spite of these solutions to the issue of physical availability, conversational availability remained a trial. Some students struggled to engage the Egyptian women in advanced-level subjects. Martha was one of those who felt the challenge of speaking with women about intellectual topics. Rather than continue to probe them, she dealt with it in her own way:

> I have just decided to talk to men, I don't care if we are not supposed to, they are just so much more easy to talk to about those kinds of things, at least once you get past the sexual appeal. At first they look at you and think oh are you attracted to me? Why are you talking to me, unless you are interested in me? At first they are suspicious seeming 'this is weird you are a girl' but then they realize that you are serious and you are just wanting to get into the language not trying to pick up on them like some doofy American. Then they can really open up sometimes.

Ignoring the issues of safety and propriety, Martha chose to converse with men in particular, because she was able to engage them in the topics that she felt would give her the practice necessary to perform well on the OPI. She felt that interacting with men provided her with a favorable learning environment because it offered more profound conversational possibilities, and therefore decided that any risk involved was worth the linguistic gains she expected to acquire. As Bown (2009) puts it, she "acted autonomously by constructing the conditions [she] deemed necessary for [her] learning" (p.575).

Reactions to harassment and assault. The women devised a number of strategies for avoiding sexual harassment and chose different reactions to the emotional aftermath of these experiences. Among these were (a) adhering to the program guidelines; (b) avoiding men of a certain age; (c) avoiding/tuning out men in general; (d) minimizing potentially traumatic events; (e) actively processing negative emotions (such as anger or guilt).

Although harassment and assault were common for the women in our study, bear in mind most of these students made no indication that they were traumatized by the events. A number of them stated that they had expected it to happen, and therefore felt psychologically prepared. When it did happen, they all reacted to the situation in their own way, either by ignoring it, minimizing its significance, or expressing anger toward the perpetrators or themselves.

Tuning it out. Some students indicated having been harassed so often they just stopped noticing; they ignored the catcalls, hissing, and whistling from men on the street. By tuning out the harassment, they effectively managed their mental and emotional responses to a potentially frustrating event. Brooke was one of them:

> I honestly have like toned it out to the extent that the other day some of the guys from our program were walking behind—behind Annabeth and I. We were walking home from school and they—they were trying to get our attention...they said for like ten minutes. They were like whistling and like calling our names, and we had no idea. Like, we couldn't—I...I had totally toned it out. So I—it seems like it doesn't happen so much anymore, like the cat calls and stuff, but I really think it's just cause I—I'm like so used to it that I don't even....I just don't hear it

anymore. Unless you're like walking right past 'em and they say something...um....but like it all—it happens a lot from a distance, like I just zone out when I'm walking. I don't acknowledge them. I don't look at them.

In this case Brooke and her friend Annabeth had trained themselves to ignore all comments from young men to the extent that they did not even notice when the comments were coming from some of their male friends in the program. Other students continued to notice, but chose to ignore this treatment. Melissa did not like all of the attention she was receiving, and eventually disregarded all of these unwanted overtures:

And sometimes, you know, guys will walk by and be like, 'you're so beautiful!' or whatever. I'm just like, I just kinda take it in my stride. I don't know. I just ignore it. Or people...like even if they... just say hi to me, like they're being nice. Like, 'Hi!' I'll just like, ignore them. Cause I'm like, 'Eh, I don't really want to engage with you right now,' you know? So I mean, sometimes I feel kind of mean, but I'm just like, whatever. I don't need—this is unnecessary attention right now, so I don't need to...to engage them. I don't know.

It seems from her account that she was so tired of getting unwanted attention, she stopped acknowledging those who tried to get her attention, even in cases when their comments were clearly innocuous. Despite cases in which they were "just being nice," she was tired of dealing with the comments that were not quite so innocent, and therefore tuned out remarks from all men. This was Melissa's approach to managing her affective responses. Rather than getting upset, she chose to ignore these kinds of remarks, taking ownership of her ability to control her learning environment.

Minimization. Kathleen was one of those who were harassed and assaulted on a number of occasions. The first time she minimized the experience based on the age of the perpetrator, "'If it had been someone older I think I would have been more upset." The boy who had harassed her was a young teenager, and therefore she was not affronted, as she would have been had he been older. She continues, indicating that she was not the only one who chose to view an encounter humorously rather than traumatically:

> Other girls would tell me about their experiences, and…it seems like a lot of
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> people, they just have like random young boys come and grab 'em, and we would
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> talk about it…and sometimes we'd laugh a little bit, and be like 'Oh my gosh,
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> these little boys, they can't seem to handle themselves.'

Kathleen stated that similar things were happening to other women, who all chose to laugh at the situation in order to make it less traumatic. This is yet more evidence of the agency students exhibit by employing strategies to help them process the upsetting circumstances they face because of their female status. Younger boys are the ones identified as the culprits here, and the reason the students gave for minimizing the experience (laughing at the fact). Interestingly enough, these types of events brought out very different reactions in the women who found themselves the victims of unexpected assault. One day fairly early on in the program, three of the women, Annabeth, Brittany, and Brooke, were walking along the side of the road together when they were rushed by three young boys. The boys had apparently planned the attack, each agreeing to grab the breasts of one of the women. Following the shock of what had happened in public in broad daylight, the women began to laugh. Apparently the fact that the boys had been so

young was not only significant enough to eliminate any threat, offense, or trauma they might have dealt with, but also comical enough that it actually made them laugh.

In her interview Annabeth giggled at the recollection of the event and then clarified, "Sorry, it's a serious problem. I don't mean to laugh, but it was just so odd to me. Like there were three…the oldest one was maybe 13, like they were really young and like mine was like maybe 12 if that." Brooke agreed, "So it's only happened to me twice, and it was always like younger boys, so I guess it doesn't really, like, traumatize me cause maybe I don't know...I'm used to being around kids."

The third victim, Brittany, did not describe the incident in her interview. She admits to having been one of the three women who were attacked that day, but the incident was less significant than others had been for her in Egypt. She declared that it was nothing in comparison to the event 'on the bridge', which was for her the worst experience. She could not just chalk the latter incident up to harmless youthful curiosity. The minor had held her against her will and assaulted her, seemingly without conscience. She did her best not to react emotionally in public, but she admits, "When I got off the bridge I almost started crying and I was like, 'What! Don't do—you're in public, there's people walking around and staring that are gonna look at you...don't cry!!!'"
The attack was initially traumatic for her, but when interviewed about her overall experience in the program, the only negative observation she made was that the Maadi area was boring for her, and that she preferred greater Cairo because there was more to do. If she had indeed bounced back at the time of the interview from her apparent trauma, what was it that made such a serious event seemingly easy to overcome? When asked about it later she wrote, "What the guy did was wrong but I knew ahead of time that these

things are fairly common in Egypt which I believe is due to social reasons…so I didn't take it personally and now I can talk about the experience without any bad feelings." She cited awareness of the problem and expectation of its likelihood as reasons behind her emotional distancing. She also wrote, "I tried to understand why…(and) put it into an overall anthropological perspective," assuming responsibility for her agency by intentionally changing her perspective and aiming at understanding. She knew she had some control over the way she reacted to the incident, and consciously made active choices to help her process her emotions.

Anger. Kathleen was another one of the students who were assaulted on more than one occasion. In reporting one of these incidents she displayed her choice to laugh it off, but in others she recalls a great deal of anger in her reaction to the event. The following excerpt from her interview reveals more about the circumstances of one such incident.

> I once got grabbed on the street…and like they kind of got my bum and my boobs, at the same time, and so I was really mad and I yelled at them…but it didn't really bother me long term, I just was angry for a bit, hahaha. Like, the next day I was fine. I was probably angry for the rest of that day, but the next day I walked in the same place, and, I—I was okay. So it didn't really bother me long term, and I mostly just yelled at them, but part of that might have been because it was like somebody, I think he was like fourteen maybe, and somehow the age seems to make a difference to me.

Although she was very angry about the attack, she reports getting over it quickly, simply because the perpetrator was young. Her initial reaction was anger, but by the next

day, she claims, it had ceased to bother her. After expressing her emotions outwardly, she laughed it off, essentially choosing to regulate her emotional response by minimizing her experience based on the age of the offender.

However, she could not as easily overlook another more serious incident, her mob attack at al-leyla al-kabira, which left her both angry and afraid. "The first time I wasn't really frightened, I was just angry, but the second time I was." She admits to being angry and frightened, but Kathleen did not exhibit any of the reactions that the women described in previous studies have shown: even though it may have been easier for her, she did not surrender to emotional withdrawal, decreased motivation, or dissatisfaction with the Egyptian culture. In fact, in reflecting back on the experience she said, "I am still glad I attended. And we went through a crowd which we should have avoided, which was foolish of us…but I don't regret my attendance."

Kathleen admits that she should have avoided a certain crowd. She might have made better choices in order to assure her own safety. As agents, the students frequently made the choice, at their own risk, to flout the rules. In this case Kathleen not only failed to avoid the large group of men, she also willingly attended the celebration with only three escorts, whereas the rules required that she bring four. Such was the case with Susan, the other female student who attended that night.

Susan also got a lot of unwanted attention from Arab men; she received so many marriage proposals she had stopped counting the number. In addition to Kathleen, Susan was also grabbed at the same event that night of al-layla al-kabira. In contrast to some previously discussed disturbances, the culprit was identified as an 'older man' whose age she estimated in his fifties. Her account follows:

It was fine for the most part, except this one guy pinched my butt. Hahaha. And I was, like, ready to go after him, you know, like, 'What are you doing?' And then, like, you know, I was, like, it's not even worth it…it was just, like, so crowded and it was just, like, this moment where we, like, got out of the crowds so we all kind of, like, stepped out, and were just kind of, like, ugh, you know, and he swooped in right at that moment…Yeah. Like, it wasn't really worth going after the stupid Arab man… Not worth chasing him down in the middle of a huge crowd, you know, what would happen if, like, this white woman punched…so, like, I was surprised, and he sped up, you know, just kind of took off, you know, in the direction that was, like, the most open. And I was, like, ready to go, but decided it wasn't worth the chase.

Susan felt strongly enough about what had happened that she was inclined to violence, indicating that she wanted to chase him down and punch him. She was prepared to personally seek justice for his wrongdoing and wanted him to be punished. However, due to the densely packed crowd, and the effort it would have taken to track him down, she changed her mind. Her further explanation gives us more information about another one of the reasons the situation presented a challenge for her:

That's frustrating, that I had to depend on someone else, on four other people. Like, it ended up—I went with three guys and I was okay, you know…but it was hard for me, you know, to have to depend on four men. You know, like as if I was incapable of, like, taking care of myself or protecting myself, you know, like that's not something that's easily—I don't know, that I easily accept, maybe just from, like, my upbringing or my parents, like, have taught me to, like, be an

independent person. Be a woman who can take care of herself and not have to, like, worry about someone else taking care of me.

The situation challenged her pride in her identity as a self-reliant woman who could take care of herself regardless of the situation. On a number of occasions, she made clear the value she placed on her own autonomy, describing herself as an adamant feminist. She felt that the requirement to bring four escorts undermined her autonomy even before the incident happened. Therefore she must have felt increased threat to her identity when she failed to prevent the experience despite the assistance of three of her male colleagues. Even with their help she was unable to stop it from happening.

Her distress notwithstanding, she did not seem to be very upset by the occurrence later on. She did not withdraw from her commitment to learning the language. On the contrary she continued to invest in every aspect of the program (her classes, her homework, her newspaper reading, and her speaking requirement). She was not deterred from interacting with the people of the host culture, as other women were in other foreign programs. In fact, she continued to speak with Arabs of both genders. She was able to differentiate between those she felt were respectable versus disreputable, choosing to associate the negative experience in her mind not with Arabs in general, or even Arab men. Here she comments on the Arab people as a whole and on the type of person who commits that kind of offense:

> I've met some very, very kind people, Arab men included, and they've treated me very well. But I think that, like, if you're the type of person that would pinch a woman's butt, like, for your own, like satisfaction, I don't really have that much respect for you. You know, like I don't care what culture you come from, you

know, like, that's…I feel, like, pretty universally disrespectful. Especially as a fifty-year-old man, you know. Like, come on. Come on. Really? You probably have a wife at home. You know, like, go pinch her butt. You're allowed to do that. You're supposed to do that. Like, why would you go looking for another woman?

According to western culture, a woman should have access to all public areas and all walks of life, yet the cultural and social norms in other countries may not enable the freedom that we feel is our due. Students might better ensure their safety if they were to model their behavior after the Egyptian women around them. Rather than continue to insist on equal public access, they might accept local sociocultural ideas about how to act as native Egyptian women, who generally avoid the celebration at Sayyida Zaynab.

The issue is as much about following sociocultural norms as it is about following rules. In the case of the two students who were assaulted at al-layla al-kabira, both had been counseled by the administrators not to attend. They had been advised that any woman who insisted on appearing at the celebration was required to bring at least four men as escorts, yet neither of the two were able to find four escorts, and therefore settled on three. While it is not true that the attacks were their fault, they intentionally put themselves in a situation that they knew to be potentially dangerous. As evidenced by the Lara Logan incident, as well as these and other less prominent experiences, women can put themselves in jeopardy when they choose to interact with large groups of men.

My own reaction to an incident of assault may provide further insight into the types of thoughts and emotions experienced by the women in reaction to assault, as well

as the ways in which they may have coped with any negative psychological effects. Though my experience was less uncomfortable than many, it left me extremely angry. After the initial shock, I got up all the voice I could muster and yelled at the perpetrator, "Shame on you!" in Arabic. There was nothing more I could do, since he was already long gone. My next reaction was to cry. Either I was not as strong as Brittany or I did not care what the public thought of me, because I cried for quite a while. I continued to cry even when I had arrived at the club. "How could I let this happen?" I asked myself. I had been so proud of myself for 'not letting' it happen until then. When it finally did happen, I was so angry, I could not forgive myself for it.

I cycled through a range of other emotions: embarrassment, guilt, and even depression. I continued to blame myself for allowing the assault. After all, I had been duly warned. This was why the administrators had told us not to dress in tight clothing— to look as unattractive as possible. I chastised myself for not listening when they told us not to smile or talk to men, and wondered why I had not paid more attention when they said we were not supposed to go out at night without an escort.

Eventually I realized that I had observed all of the advised precautions. I had not been wearing tight clothing; I was wearing medical scrubs. I had not smiled at or talked to the man; I had not even walked close to him. In fact, I could have had no idea that he was even nearby, since he had approached so quickly from behind. And even though I did not have an escort, it was not late at night; it was eleven o'clock in the morning.

Why then, was I accusing myself of having let it happen? It could not have been foreseen by any means, therefore I was surely not culpable in any way. It occurred to me that rape victims often assume guilt for their attacks. Ms. Logan apparently felt a similar

sense of shame, and coped by writing a statement describing her attack. She said, "'[the statement] didn't leave me to carry the burden alone, like my dirty little secret, something that I had to be ashamed of'" (Stelter, 2011). Even though my own experience was not nearly of that magnitude, relating to victims like Ms. Logan was a source of solace for me. I eventually was able to process my negative emotions, talking myself through the guilt associated with the experience. Knowing that I would never find other victims guilty, I was finally able to assign the guilt to the perpetrator and acquit myself.

[ii] According to Ashley, camels were a bargaining tool for acquiring a wife. "It's kind of like this joke that Egyptian men sometimes do, especially just um...merchants. Like, how many camels would it take to like, get your wife? Or like, how many camels for you."

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Conclusions

The findings of this study demonstrate that gender mediates all aspects of a student's study abroad experience in Cairo, Egypt. Gender influences accessibility to language learning opportunities, restricts students' experiences by reducing their freedom by time and place, and influences students' ownership of their own bodies and their sense of safety in public spaces. Students reported gender-related challenges to finding interlocutors, appropriately interacting with interlocutors, encouraging interlocutors to speak at an advanced level, fulfilling their responsibilities within a gender-specific time frame, and maintaining a safe environment free from harassment and assault.

In general the women dealt with their injustices well. They clearly were not happy that the incidents had happened, but they were surprisingly calm. When we consider the gravity of some of these incidents, it really is remarkable that the victims were not more traumatized. They did not seem to show any of the negative reactions exhibited by the women in previous studies, who were frustrated with the culture and their treatment as women, to the extent that many of them closed off and withdrew from learning the language (Isabelli-Garica, 2003; Talburt & Stewart, 1999; Twombly, 1995).

Student Preparation

The morning of February 11, when Ms. Logan returned to Egypt just days after being asked to leave, a blogger asked Ms. Logan if CBS was insured for her (implying the hazards she might face in Egypt). She responded, "You know, I don't worry about things like that" (de Moraes & Farhi, 2011). But these are things we cannot ignore considering the high percentages of harassment and assault reported lately: 98% of

foreign women visitors experience harassment according to the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (Petri, 2011).

Amber felt that American women received more negative attention than the local women: "Egyptian men…stare at women and stuff like that, but not like they stare at us, does that make sense?...I've watched them sometimes, stare at other girls...it is different when they're staring at an American girl." According to Petri (2011), Amber is right. Egyptian men do treat foreign women differently, and the question that begs to be addressed is, "Why?"

The higher percentage of harassed foreign women may be in part because of their appearance, but, (although it in no way excuses the behavior of the men, which behavior is a violation of Egyptian values), the possibility remains that we as foreign women may not be acting culturally appropriate. Perhaps American students are not conforming to Arab cultural norms.

Female students need to be aware of the consequences they face when they place themselves in these situations. As autonomous individuals, they are able to choose the risks they want to take, but they must also realize there are potential consequences. If the students had chosen not to attend the celebration, they could have avoided these uncomfortable and dangerous encounters. Similarly, anecdotal evidence supports the idea that if women dress modestly and conform to cultural norms they can avoid harassment, but high levels of harassment are also reported by local Egyptian women, who are often both completely covered and culturally aware. According to the survey conducted in 2008 by the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights, 83% of women in Egypt were harassed (Petri, 2011).

As is evident by this high percentage, the local environment affords many gender-based experiences that are not positive. A number of these negative affordances range from simply irritating to undeniably dangerous. However, by preparing adequately and taking ownership of their behavior and cognition, students can themselves affect both the opportunities afforded to them by their learning environment as well as their ability to cope with potentially traumatic events.

Susan said that making the best of the experience was all about her attitude, "I had good and bad days just like everyone else, and I might as well keep a good attitude and keep working at it. And my experience is my own, and, like, I can make it what I want it to be." At another point in the interview she said, "with my experiences here it seems like I can deal with it better because I decide to deal with it." As Susan makes clear, students can take ownership of their choices, including their own cognitive or affective processing. By choosing to retain a good attitude, rather than grumble about her misfortunes, Susan was able to shape her study abroad experience to meet her expectations. If students understand and take advantage of their agentic nature and act accordingly they can make their experience a positive one.

Melissa confirmed both the idea that her reactions were within her control, and the notion that everyone is afforded a unique experience, "I think a lot of it is attitude, but then again everyone has different experiences, and we can't really judge their experiences." Every student is unique and each has a unique set of factors contributing to his/her environment. Given each unique set of circumstances, there are also unique options available for the individuals involved. Students are constantly faced with making choices about how they will act, react, and interact. They can choose to interpret others'

actions in a variety of ways and they can choose how they are going to feel about it as well. Students are able to manage their own affective (emotional) reactions to their negative encounters, and importantly, taking ownership of their emotions (attitude) is a significant factor in creating a positive environment and a favorable sojourn abroad.

Department Preparation

In contrast to the previously mentioned research on Russian study abroad programs in which gender was a significant factor contributing to language gains (Brecht & Robinson, 1993; Brecht et al., 1993; Polanyi, 1995), the later study by Davidson in 2010 revealed that gender was less significant in comparison to previous years. One of his hypotheses accredited the improvement to the pre-departure training provided to the students (female students in particular) with the goal of assisting them in strategies of self-management, 'identity competence', and language learning.

Information about the students' preparation for this program as well as students' successful coping strategies can have important implications for language departments, who are actively involved in preparing their students for study abroad, and in continuing to help them in-country with any issues they might face, so that the students can continue their efforts to improve their language skills.

A few of the American students in Egypt hypothesized about the reasons behind their successful coping, most of which dealt with the idea that they had been well prepared by the administrators. They had been given instructions on everything from appropriate dress and body language to safe times and places to be out in the streets. They felt that all of this advice about what to do and what not to do ultimately helped them not only to prevent these situations but also to cope with them when they occurred.

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Cindy admitted that the preparation of the administration was helpful for her even though she felt that they may have exaggerated some aspects, "I expected it. I mean, (the administrators) prepared us well for it...after the first few days I was pretty well adjusted…They might have over exaggerated certain things, but being prepared for the most extreme means accepting what is a little easier." The administrators' admonitions helped Kathleen deal with her experiences as well:

> Since they said it so many times, I was like "Okay, I'm coming to the Middle East, I'm just gonna wait for it, I know it's gonna happen, you know, It won't be a big deal." And like other women would tell me about their experiences, and …it seems like a lot of people, they just have like random young boys come and grab 'em, and we would talk about it…and sometimes we'd laugh a little bit, and be like "Oh my gosh, these little boys, they can't seem to handle themselves," and because it was so normal, and because [the administrators] were so intent on making us aware that this was a possibility and a likelihood, I think it wasn't—it wasn't quite so shocking for me, you know. I was expecting it somewhat.

The fact that similar things were happening to other female students, as well as the fact that she had been warned, made Kathleen more prepared for the incidents. The expectation of assault somehow made it less 'shocking' and easier to cope with. It also appears to be less shameful. Just as Lara Logan said that sharing her experience helped her face the shame she felt, when students know they are not the only victims, they can understand they do not have to feel guilt or embarrassment over what happened. Simple awareness can assist recovery and minimize trauma.

Better awareness of the challenges students will face as a result of their gender can help students both avoid the challenges as well as deal with them when they do happen. As foreign study programs prepare to send students abroad, administrators can interview the students one-on-one, to make sure that each student knows how to best prevent harassment and assault. In these interviews administrators should address the kinds of situations students will encounter as well as the best ways to deal with them. While supporting students' autonomy by helping them understand their ability to make their own decisions about how they interact with and react to their learning environment, directors can encourage students to seek support in the event that they are harassed or assaulted.

What is more, institutions do have a legal and ethical responsibility for the students they send on study abroad. They are liable for their safety and welfare, which presents a difficult situation as programs go about setting rules. On the one hand, they want to give students their autonomy, and on the other they must assume a certain level of responsibility for protecting students from potentially traumatic events. This is difficult because every situation will be influenced by program restrictions, as well as the agency of the students and the local population. Of course, institutions have no influence on the choices of locals, but they can make wise, carefully weighed decisions about program rules, and they can educate and counsel the students before departure and during the sojourn abroad.

The program directors and administrators in this study advised students thus, "You need to make sure that you dress in loose clothing. You need to make sure that you do not look men in the eye, do not smile at them, and do not talk to them. Do not walk

through a group of men or go on the same side of the street if you see a group of them

together. Avoid them entirely."

The women in our study felt that this was valuable counsel for preventing

harassment and assault. Although I am not aware of any objective evidence that these

measures work, it may be true that there are strategies that will help keep women safe.

However, administrators should be wary of the way they talk about these situations,

because they cannot protect students against everything. They cannot control for every

aspect of these incidents. However, if they tell the students, "You can prevent this from

happening" and it does happen, the students are naturally going to think, "I did not

prevent this from happening. I let this happen. It is my fault. I am guilty for this."

Administrators do want to prepare them adequately. They want to help students

keep themselves safe, but do not want to add any psychological pressure to what they are

already dealing with. Foreign study can be very psychologically trying. The students

spent years trying to complete program prerequisites, and then once they arrived in-

country, the rigor only continued.

As mentioned earlier, Pellegrino Aveni (2005) identified a number of obstacles

that students on study abroad face which may prevent them from making language

progress (culture shock, social anxiety, self-consciousness, and so on), and the students in

Cairo reported a number of these and more. To add to these obstacles, when students

become victims of traumatic events such as sexual assault, they must cope with not only

the added psychological pressure of having been harassed or assaulted, but perhaps also

the self-condemnation of a guilty conscience. They have to deal with the feeling that it

was their fault, and the idea that they are bad people for letting it happen. That added psychological load places unnecessary stress on already over-burdened students.

However administrators choose to prepare students, they should make sure students know how to help keep themselves safe, and do their best to prevent negative gendered experiences. But they should also help students understand that not everything is within their control. Bad things happen, and when they do happen the students are not at fault. With this in mind, administrators can strive to help them overcome some of the obstacles they face in the target culture, so that the students can focus on what Kline (1998) identified as their real goal: fluency.

Limitations

The difference in experience between the women and the men was not the focus of this study. Because my participants were largely limited to female students in Egypt, the study is not necessarily generalizable to male students in Egypt, to students of both genders in other countries the Middle East, or any other students in other countries.

Furthermore, the students came from a conservative religious university, where there was a relative lack of ethnic, racial, and religious diversity; thus, the participants for the study do not constitute a sample representative of American students, which again indicates that the study is not generalizable to other groups with greater diversity or different ethnic, racial, and/or religious makeup.

Although all of the students were aware of my presence as a student, not all of them were aware that I was also participating in the program as a researcher. Of those who did, only one was actually aware of my research questions. This student was another graduate student in my department who knew the subject of my study for some time

before our departure. However, in order to prevent bias, she agreed to keep the focus of the study confidential.

Suggestions for Future Research

The male and female students in our study were afforded very different experiences due to their differences in gender. Men and women had access to different places and people, and they had qualitatively different kinds of conversations. For this reason their language abilities may be very disparate as well. Future research could include a quantitative look at foreign students in Egypt, focusing specifically on language gains and gender as a predictive factor of these language gains.

The present study focused on the gendered experiences of female students in Cairo, but provides little information about the experiences of male students. Future studies could include male students in Egypt as well as students of both genders studying throughout the Middle East and elsewhere, addressing the issues students face in their respective countries.

I mentioned that there is a lack of empirical evidence supporting the idea that dress and manner are instrumental factors leading to the harassment and assault imposed on students. Future studies could look at these elements to determine if indeed they are predictive factors contributing to these offensive and dangerous acts.

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