Gen Zeds: Towards a Culture of Merit

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The "Gen Zeds" of the title are female Emirati students in their early twenties at Zayed University who have one foot in the traditional Islamic culture of their families and another in a world that expects them to revolutionize economic and social life. Gen Zeds represent today's generation of Emirati students. Though they are from Zayed University, they could just as easily have been from UAE University or the Higher Colleges of Technology because their education has been the result of a big push for opportunity by the country's founding father, the late Sheikh Zayed of Abu Dhabi. These students (the Gen Zeds) are highly educated, media literate, and intense users of the internet. Upon graduation, they are expected to assume leadership positions in the United Arab Emirates despite living in a society that until recently has not permitted women roles beyond motherhood and homemaking. This paper considers whether the lessons and experiences they encounter at university will equip them for life in a society radically different from that of their mothers'.

Introduction

The students who walk the manicured paths of Zayed University in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) speak with the still small voices that others of their gender do in society at large. Largely unrepresented in the halls of power and nearly invisible on the pages of print media, women remain unequal partners with men in society. Nonetheless, Zayed University students and their sisters at educational institutions across the country belong to a generation unlike any other. These "girls" who must become women are expected to become leaders of their nation.

In the last half century, the UAE has undergone a remarkable transformation. As late as 1950, Dubai was a city of huts lining unpaved streets. As late as 1970, literacy rates in the UAE hovered just above 20%. Only a fraction of the mothers of today's students graduated from high school. Only a fraction more of their fathers did too. Today, pressures on the cultural landscape are mounting as the country develops into a more diverse and modern economy with more educated citizens.

This movement toward integration into the global economy has not been happenstance. It has reflected the clear national priorities of His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan, who was President of the country from its formation in 1971 until his death in 2004. Fulfillment of his priorities has produced change on many fronts,

particularly with respect to technology and its widespread adaptation in far-flung corners of society.

To meet the needs of this vision, Zayed University, with campuses in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, was founded in 1998 to prepare female leaders to help mold the UAE's future. Total enrollment in this all-female university is about 2,500. Its students are being groomed to confront a rapidly changing information- and technology-driven world. The Zayed University home page notes that the university was founded to prepare leaders who could foresee possibilities and capture the opportunities that would "create the future of the United Arab Emirates.… They will confront a rapidly changing, information- and technology-driven world that will defy certain prediction."

The country needs university graduates. While it is small, the UAE is a unique place of perhaps 4.3 million that is unlike many other contemporary societies and even unlike many other Arab/Islamic states. Not only does it have one of the world's highest economic growth rates (12% GDP growth in 2003, 7.4% in 2004, and 6.6% estimated for 2005 before the oil spike), but also it is a nation in which the indigenous population is a small minority. Current "official" figures estimate that UAE nationals constitute between 15% and 20% of the country's total population (UAE Interact, 2006). The remaining 80% plus are expatriates. Though most of them have come to earn a living, they are discouraged from making the UAE their permanent home due to the country's laws and customs.

Expatriates make up the bulk of the workforce, and they perform both the manual and intellectual tasks that keep the country running. The government hopes to replace expatriates with local people through a process called "Emiratization." Most students expect jobs that give them management roles; it is unlikely that Emiratis would perform manual labor and many do not want to "work their way up the ladder." Therefore, the country will continue to depend upon an army of workers from India and Pakistan to build the infrastructure projects sprouting in the desert. Earning less than $300 per month, these workers labor long shifts in temperatures hovering around 50° Celsius, erecting the air-conditioned shopping malls, apartments, and luxury homes of the favored few.

Today, as oil and gas revenues flow from the well-head, life is lived large with the Emirati equivalent of two cars in every garage. The state provides an easy life for nationals with free education and medicine, high-paying government jobs, short working hours, expensive pensions and inexpensive housing loans. The UAE has blossomed in the desert and recently has taken the first small steps away from oil dependence. The federal government has invested heavily in tourism, aviation, re-export commerce, and telecommunications. In doing so, the leadership has recognized that the country must make more of its human resources. Devoid of most natural resources except for petro-carbons, the UAE, particularly the Emirate of Dubai, has invested billions of dollars in high technology. The great dream is that educated and trained nationals will replace the thousands of foreign professionals now running the new technology economy (Walters, 2001, p. 82).

This new economy and a trained female [and male national] workforce are the twin pillars of hope for tomorrow's UAE. Yet, these pillars could just as easily topple rather than prop up the future. As the new knowledge-based economy propels the society into an unknown future, that same new economy will enfranchise individuals, particularly women. As women are trained for the "modern" workplace, the roles of wife and mother in the current model of a functioning family will collide with the role of an educated and empowered woman who wants (and is needed) to work outside the home. This transition will not be easy. In Western societies, such as the United States, a focus on the individual — isolated, independent and separated — is embedded in the values of the culture (Connard, 1996). To call these facts into question is "seemingly to question the value of freedom" (Gilligan, 1993, p. xiv). But these fundamental "facts" are different in Arabic/Islamic societies. Traditional societies, such as that in the UAE, have focused more on the group and interrelated networks, defined in no small measure by religion and circles of kinship and friendship.

Underlying social environments are already changing as the UAE lurches forward towards a more diverse, modern economy (see Connard). For conservative Muslims, alteration of core values is perceived as no less than an attack on their faith. "Brought up in a complex but functioning system of social loyalties and responsibilities, [a conservative male] finds those loyalties, defined by faith and kin, denounced as sectarian and nepotistic, and those responsibilities derided and abandoned in favor of capitalistic

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acquisitiveness or socialistic expropriations" (Lewis, 1993, p. 39). Many male Muslims are not keen to see their supremacy lost in their own homes "to emancipated women and rebellious children" (Lewis, 1993, p. 40).

Research Questions

Patterned after a much larger survey routinely conducted at a major Midwestern university in the United States, Zayed University created a 187-question questionnaire exploring family and family life, how students conduct their lives both on and off the university campus, their emotional and mental state, health and nutrition, the relationship of values to academic performance, and their media life. This questionnaire, "Towards a Culture of Merit," will become part of the Transitional Women series, holistically exploring and benchmarking the life and times of these young women. Many of the results of this questionnaire and other studies have already been published or presented as part of a stream of research. The results are derived from the young women that we have affectionately labeled the "Gen Zeds."

Method

The survey was administered in class to students in the College of Communication and Media Sciences during the last two weeks of May 2002 on the Abu Dhabi and Dubai campuses. The survey was anonymous. Because Zayed University is both an English as a Second Language and English as a Foreign Language environment, instructions were explained. When necessary, words were defined. A total of 100 out of 250 students responded.

Results

Sixty-three percent of the respondents were from the Dubai campus; 37% were from the Abu-Dhabi campus. The minimum age was 19; the maximum 23 and the mean age was 21.5 years. The students were at the upper edge of the age range among the siblings. Sixteen percent classified themselves as sophomores, 20% as juniors, and 58% as seniors. The mean grade point average was 3.11 (out of 4); the median was 3.10 and mode 3.50.

Most students were living among family groups. Ninety-two percent lived with their parents, 2% lived with their own family, and 4% lived with their husband's family. Only 2% lived independently. Six percent of the students had children. The mean number of female siblings was 3.7; the mean number of brothers was 3.2. The maxi-

mum number of female siblings was 11 while the maximum number of male siblings was 9. The number of siblings varied by emirate. The mean number of sisters in Dubai was 3.8; in Abu Dhabi it was 3.4. In Dubai the mean number of brothers was 3.3; in Abu Dhabi that figure was 3.2. The mean age of the youngest sister was 14.1 for all emirates; the mean age of the oldest was 23.8. Mean age of the youngest brothers was 14.2; the mean age of the oldest was 25.1.

Students came from families with largely uneducated but financially well-off parents. About 74% of fathers had completed high school or less; 78% of the mothers had completed high school or less. Only 23% came from families in which both parents had a high school education or more. Only 4% came from families in which both parents had a college degree.

Forty percent of students classified their family as middle class; 38% classified themselves as upper middle class; and 11% classified themselves as wealthy. Only 2% said that they came from poor families. Half of the respondents attended a high school with more than 500 students, 28% came from high schools of between 251-500, and only 9% came from high schools of fewer than 100 students.

Parental encouragement was listed as a reason for attending Zayed University (ZU) by about 16% of the respondents. About 13% said ZU was their first choice, about 12% listed the fact that ZU was close to home as a reason for attending, and about 11% said that successful placement of ZU graduates was the reason they chose the university.

Most students had wide-ranging, complex, and multiple support groups with whom they interacted in many ways. Twenty-five percent of students spoke to their mothers daily, 42% spoke to them at least several times a week. Respondents spoke to their fathers much less frequently. Fifteen percent spoke to their fathers daily; 20% spoke to them at least several times a week. On average, students spoke to 3.5 adults, in addition to their parents, for advice and support.

Friends and friendship were a big part of their lives. About 94% of all students said they felt part of a group of friends. The circle of close friends comprised about 4.3 females, of whom 3.9 attended the same university. The size of the friendship circle varied by campus: In Dubai

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the circle was 3.9 friends while in Abu Dhabi that circle was 4.8 friends. These friendship groups were (and remain) critically important. They provide encouragement, a sounding board, a support system, and a sense of connection to the respondents. About 85% believed their friends cared about them. About the same number believed that friends listened to them and encouraged them to be the best they could be in everything that they did. When hard times hit, 95% went to their friends for advice. About 92% did so because they believed that these friends supported them during difficult times.

Several means of communication helped maintain these circles of friendship. A primary one was the face-to-face communication associated with simply being on campus. When asked why they attended ZU, 27% agreed strongly with the statement "I like college for the academics" and 38% said they liked college for the social atmosphere. Even more enjoyed the relative freedom of the campus, where they were not responsible to a parent, a husband, or a brother, and where they could lead their lives relatively unfettered. The grounds have become a place where they can laugh and tell jokes and explore their lives. Though exploration may seem a non-sequitur, the "Lovelaceian" nature of the internet means that the thin grey wire leading to the LAN connection and to the world at large allows them to go over the walls of the grounds and become free.

Technology has influenced how students communicate with their friendship circles and others in the United Arab Emirates. One device that has had a major impact is the mobile telephone. One of every two people in the UAE had a mobile telephone in 2001, making it the highest per capita cell phone user in the Arab region and the 11th in the world (Castillo, 2001; for today's figures see CIA, 2007). Three in four of the students had mobile telephones and most carried them on campus, despite the fact it was against university policy. Students circumvent the policy by putting their telephones on vibrate and using an earpiece, the wiring of which is hidden beneath their *abaya* and *shilah* (the traditional shawl and cloak). Some used telephones to communicate with the boyfriends they were not supposed to have. Students who used the mobile telephone more frequently seemed to be risk takers. Those who agreed with the statement "it is okay to break ZU's rules" spent an average of 9.5 hours on the mobile during a typical week; those who disagreed spent an average of 4.4 hours.

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Even more pervasive among the students was internet use. The data in this survey show that in a typical week ZU students spent as much time on the internet as they did in the combined activities of reading magazines, newspapers, and books. They also spent more than twice as much time on the internet as they did shopping, twice as much as they did watching television, and more than they did in physical contact with friends.

Nielsen-like media diaries unconnected with this survey have shown that many students access the internet morning, noon, and night and maintain multiple e-mail accounts (see Walters, 2002).[1] Data from this current survey reinforced those findings: About 80% of students checked their e-mail at least once daily and about 78% had a home computer in addition to their laptop. Students also had a special place to use that computer and to study. All students had access to the internet on campus during the school week, which runs Saturday through Wednesday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. They often used the internet in the library — where they gathered with friends — or in the cafeteria, which is wired as well. In these places, they congregated around the flicker of the computer screen much like the children of an earlier generation gathered around the glimmer of the television (Pulos, 1988).

Every student chated or surfed, sometimes "talking" with people their parents don't know about, and going to sites of which they might not approve. Some students fretted about getting caught. Risk takers among the group worried that their behavior might be a problem. The more a student used the internet the more likely she was to agree with the statement "I worry that I will get into trouble due to my behavior here on campus." Those who agreed with this statement spent an average of 7.2 hours weekly on the internet; those who disagreed spent about 5.1 hours on the internet.

Measures of emotion, mood, and self esteem suggested patterns of usage tied to feelings. Highlights of these findings showed that about 16% of the respondents reported often feeling unhappy, sad or depressed. Those who related less well to their peers spent about twice as much time on the internet as those who related well to their peers; respectively, these were 11.9 hours and 5.8 hours per week. Those who wanted to be left alone spent 14.9 hours on the internet; those who did not spent about 9.7 hours. The smaller the number of

friends the higher the number of hours a respondent spent on the internet. Using the mean number of friends to divide respondents into groups, frequencies showed that Group 1 (below mean friends) used the internet for about 9 hours per week and that Group 2 (above mean friends) used the internet for about 4.9 hours. P equaled .065 for the two-tailed t-test.

Because of the large number of variables, the data can be divided in many ways. One straightforward, logical way is to explore the similarities and differences between campuses. The cities and emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai are different in their physical as well as psychological and cultural characteristics. Abu Dhabi is home to the federal government, has extensive greenery and low-rise buildings, and is religiously conservative. Dubai is a city of high-rises with a fast-paced and big-city lifestyle more tuned to the hurly burly of a vibrant commercial center. According to at least one student, Dubai has become "the Bangkok of the Middle East."

Besides adopting new devices such as the mobile telephone and the internet, other communicative habits such as the family eating an evening meal together may be changing. Only about half of the students gathered around the evening dinner table at home on a regular basis, and, when they did, they had carry-in much of the time. About half of the families ate meals at restaurants frequently. These are activities in which the grandmothers of this generation most certainly did not participate.

Discussion

The results of this survey are several. They show patterns of communications usage among female college students at what might be described as a public-private university (like the University of Michigan – Ann Arbor in the U.S.). As children of the digital age, these students are more likely to use the internet than to read or exercise. These electronic media are a bigger part of their average day than any other activity, even sleep. Results also showed that media usage was heterogeneous. Some students used the internet and the mobile telephone more than others. Heavy users of the internet tended to be sad or depressed and had smaller circles of friends than did lighter users. Some users of these two media might be called risk takers because they used the internet and the mobile telephone for activities that they knew might cause them trouble. Typically, these would include going to banned internet sites, chatting or Instant Messaging (known as "IM-ing"), and using the mobile telephone on campus. Such students clearly were probing the boundaries of authority.

In some ways, the findings describe typical college students anywhere in the world. In other ways, the find-ings describe fundamental differences between cultures within the UAE, both in terms of societal basics and communications patterns. Women in the United Arab Emirates are absent from the halls of power and have been almost invisible in the media (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldenberger, & Tarule, 1997, p. 17; taken from Olsen, 1978). This caption from a wedding party picture illustrates this latter point. No females were shown. Though she was mentioned, the bride was not pictured.

> Sheikh Hamdan bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, Dubai Deputy Ruler and UAE Minister of Finance and Industry, and Sheikh Saud bin Rashid Al-Mualla, Umm Al Quwain Crown Price and Deputy Ruler, yesterday attended a ceremony hosted by Abdullah Al-Musawi, FNC Member, on the wedding of his son Faisal to the daughter of Saeed Ghanem Al-Marri. Also present were senior officials, and prominent citizens. (Monday, March 3, 2003, *Gulf News*, p. 7)

Zayed University students will need to overcome such hurdles to win the race to make their voices larger. To date, progress has been mixed. Although some students are not silent, the majority remain so. A student protest to mark the anniversary of the Intifada in 2002 attracted perhaps 20 participants. Some students take risks; most do not. Some students note that they feel powerful; many feel powerless. Naturally, there are differences between those who let things happen and those who make active choices. Scholars who have studied such issues in the United States believe that individuals grow up "… to see themselves as 'deaf and dumb' when they are raised in profound isolation under the most demeaning circumstance" (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 34). Some of these circumstances remain part of the female experience in the United Arab Emirates. Here a "learned agoraphobia" is reflected in the expectation that students wear black cloaks and shawls, drive in dark-windowed cars, and live in neighborhoods in which housing compound after housing compound turns inward, with high walls separating them from the outside world.

Even controlling their own fertility is beyond the means of most – only perhaps a quarter of married women use birth control methods (United Nations, 2001). Virginity among unmarried women is a prized family possession. So concerned are these girls that most choose pads over tampons, fearing that tampons will damage their hymens. The vocabulary of address reflects the concern about virginity: Proper etiquette requires that students aged in their early twenties should be addressed as "girls," not women. A woman has had sex; a girl has not (see Gilligan, 1993, p. 70). In the UAE, it remains "illegal" to give birth without a father (Nazzal, 2003).

Many activities reinforce life roles and patterns, including the games that children play. For boys, *Karaba*, *Ma'okazi*, and *Qarahief* emphasize physical skill and gross motor stills. For girls, *Saqla* and *Umm al Lal* emphasize turn taking, protecting the young, and group communication. As both genders move from childhood into adolescence, that movement is marked by a change in dress. Where once they could wear Western-style jeans in public, boys acquire the *agal*, white *dishdasha* and *bisht*, and girls don the black *abaya* and *shilah*, even in the oppressive heat of the day.

Some childhood vestiges such as needing group talk carry forward into adolescence and early adulthood. Group talk, which contains the rhetoric of inquiry, does not carry with it the pejoratives associated with the Western notion of gossip (Spacks, 1982, pp. 33-34; Belenky et al., p.186). Learned in childhood and practiced in social gatherings known as the *majlis*, this interconnected inquiry is fostered by e-mail, by instant messaging, and by the mobile telephone. This interconnected inquiry reflects the fact that these students have what has been described as "a literal faith that they and their friends share the same thoughts and experiences." It also reflects the fact that they relish having so much in common (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 38).

The path these girls will take tracks the familial and educational environments in which each is reared. Sometimes the choices between forks in that pathway are unclear. That is because families and schools differ tremendously in the degree to which they either reinforce risk-taking or encourage conforming behavior among women (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 79). It is also because allocation of life chances and advantages differs considerably by family and by society (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 160).

In some societies, remaining dependent on the family is socially unacceptable (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 126). In the United Arab Emirates, that dependence is expected. By law, unmarried girls remain dependents up to the age of 26, and they usually do not live on their own. Women of this generation will struggle mightily to detach themselves from such expectations (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 129) because society will continue to exert pressure upon them (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 148). Even so, some examples of detachment can be seen. As this study, other surveys, focus groups, and interviews have shown, attendance at Zayed University (and others) has become a

form of birth control because many students can postpone the inevitable by spending four (or more) years at university. Using the internet provides a momentary escape from family and from the inwardly-turned, architecturally-separating and walled family compound. The mobile telephone and the internet provide a brief refuge from the tumult of their "connected lives."

Whether the majority of these women will ever become truly independent (or actually desire to do so) is a serious question, the answer to which will shape the future of the country. The assumptions that these young women make about the nature of truth and reality shape their value systems and the way in which they see the world and themselves as participants in that world. These assumptions also affect their definitions of self, the way they interact with others, their public and private personae, and their sense of control over life events (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 3).

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Conclusion

"Gen Zed" students are different from those who came before them. These students have been reared with a constant flow of media imagery streaming from computers, televisions, and movies. Their reality is the temporality that imagery from those computers, televisions and movies creates. Remote control and mouse in hand, these students have fast forwarded into the mediated world.

The "Gen Zeds" have developed an "interactive culture" exhibiting qualities increasingly divergent from the life routines of their grandmothers and mothers. Some Zayed University students are striving for independence and autonomy. Many have an emotional and intellectual openness generally not common to the society at large. Some post their innermost thoughts in a chat room or chat with strangers late into the night. Perhaps a greater social inclusion will come with the new technologies of communication. Whatever else is true, the immediacy, interactivity, and speed of the internet has already greatly accelerated the process of communicating and opened up previously unheard of worlds of knowledge and interaction (Walters, Quinn, and Walters, 2005).

They have become the "bulge" in the python for the United Arab Emirates. They are the leading edge of a groundbreaking generation of highly trained citizens, many of whom have been educated in an English-speaking environment. Having been exposed to new con-

sumerist ideas via advertising and programming, these young people are among the first to harvest the many benefits of a marketplace economy. What appears clear is that this group is more media savvy and more media oriented than either their parents or grandparents. Yet what effect their training and exposure will have on Emirati society at large is on the razor's edge.

While the proverb "the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world" may be true, it is also true that "mothers who have little sense of their own minds and voices are unable to imagine such capacities in their children" (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 163). In this journey toward the future, these students have few relevant role models. Beginning in 2006, two wives of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai, have begun appearing on the pages of the *Gulf News* promoting civil organizations and charitable organizations. Two women have been appointed to ministry level positions in the federal government in Abu Dhabi. The reality is that none of these women has succeeded solely on merit; all were either "born to the purple" or connected by family, marriage, or *wasta*.

The forward-looking alternative to this problem is to create a culture fostering the resources of the mind and leadership by expertise rather than connectedness. Whether this culture of merit can actually develop in the United Arab Emirates remains unclear. Despite a modernizing economy, kinship and marriage still count, and extended family networks wield enormous power in all aspects of life. This creates a system in the UAE that is antithetical to modern, transparent economies that generally require that the best – not the best connected – rise to the top in the major societal institutions.

Although the under-25 generation attends school, many young people lack the motivation either to work hard or to excel. Students learn at an early age how to play the system, expending time and effort haranguing teachers or plagiarizing instead of studying. Many are averse to working for a private company, preferring the comfort of traditional top-down ways of managing in government-run enterprises.

Even the mere education of women is a problematic issue in the UAE. While lip service is paid to the power of higher education, women must be valued, not just as wives and mothers, but as potential leaders in the workplace. Even if Emirati women can gain approval from the men in their families for breaking with the past, it may be impossible for them to reconcile the conflicting expectations that they will both rock the cradle and rule the world. This is not surprising. More than three decades after their own "liberation," many Western women have not found a happy compromise between home and work. The question thus remains whether Emirati women can do better than their Western sisters, if they are so permitted, and whether current advances represent the beginning of a new reality or mere tokenism.

Endnotes

1. Nielsen media diaries keep track of who is viewing what at what time in American television-viewing families. These records are kept in diary form.

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