

# Social Capital and the Omani Society in Queensland: An Ethnographic Study

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## Abstract

Many students who study abroad face difficulties when adapting in new environments and communities. Thus, this study is trying to examine whether there is a relationship between social capital within Omani Society in Queensland (OSQ) in relation to adapting to the university life and the Australian community. There is no literature that has examined adaptation and social capital within Omani communities, within different cultural landscapes. This is an ethnographic study that incorporated both observations and semi-structured interviews, and a purposive sampling method was selected for this research. Based on the thematic analysis of the interviews and observations data, the research shows that OSQ supports its members, both singles and families, to adapt to university life and integrate within Australian culture. Indeed, there are two main findings of this study that relate to OSQ and social capital. These are emotional connection and cultural distinction.

The results of this research may encourage the formation of new social clubs to assist students in their cultural transition and academic achievements through fostering social capital. Moreover, this study opens new ground for social capital theory and adaptation.

**Keywords:** Social capital • Adaptation • Omani community

## Introduction

The theory of 'social capital' has become an important field of study. This paper will contribute to current research by examining social capital within the Omani Society in Queensland (OSQ), a social club at the University of Queensland, and how it assists members to adapt to the university life and the Australian community. OSQ was established in 2003 to represent and bring together members of the Omani community across Queensland, which emphasises strong relationships between families and friends as a form of social capital. OSQ has nearly 180 members and runs different activities such as social gatherings, and sporting and cultural diversity events. It receives funding from the Consulate General of the Sultanate of Oman for these activities, as well as from members. Moreover, it has partnerships with other University of Queensland social clubs and community organisations. It also provides support for new students to find suitable accommodation, use facilities like transport, as well as provides academic advice. Furthermore, the group endeavours to support members to adapt to the Australian community and succeed within their new university environment [1]. Importantly, this study will examine how social capital within small groups works to support members in adapting to new cultural norms and contexts. There is no literature that has examined adaptation and social capital within Omani communities, within different cultural landscapes. This research will emphasise the importance of social capital to meet individual and community needs, as well as coping with cultural adaptation and supporting academic achievement.

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## Literature Review

The idea of social capital was first theorised in 1916 by L.J. Hanifan, before being most notably expanded and developed by social researcher Pierre Bourdieu, education sociologist Coleman, and political scientist Putnam [2]. Indeed, Castaneda ME and Zirger ML(2011) [3] state that Bourdieu distinguished between three types of capital: social, cultural, and economic. Economic capital relates to people access to certain goods and services, whereas both social and cultural capitals are built through social connections, obligations, and relationships [3]. Social capital has therefore been defined as "the relationships, networks and norms that facilitate collective action", constituting "the "glue" that holds our communities together" [4]. Damirchi QV, et al. [5], further separates social capital into three dimensions: the structural network ties within organisations, shared codes, narratives and language constituting the cognitive dimension, and the relational, being norms, trust, obligations and identification. However, Petzold J and Ratter BMW [6] argue that cognitive elements refer to trust, norms of reciprocity, and solidarity. These factors are what Al-Balushi AL [2] defines as the content dimension. Indeed, the evolution of social capital theory and research illustrates the importance of networks, norms, relationships, trust, and identity for the creation and sharing of knowledge [5]. Thus, this research will examine social capital within the OSQ, and ask both if and to what extent it affects members' adaptation to university life and the Australian community.

Social capital impacts many aspects of life, both individually and across the community. Human capital, for example, is an essential part of a country's economic success, complemented by social capital. Schuller T [7] argues that human capital focuses on individual agents while the social focuses on the relationships between individuals, which is critical as communication and teamwork skills are vital for modern economies. Thus, social capital within work environments is a key factor in economic success. Moreover, Petzold J and Ratter BMW [6] state that social capital, like physical and human capital, consists of "resources that [individuals] can use to achieve their interests". However, if self-interest becomes the dominant priority over altruism and working to support the group, social capital will diminish. The links that hold the community together have to reflect the communities' interests and work to support members, rather than individuals. Moreover, Teachman JD, et al. [8] believes that human and social capital work together to create wellbeing across generations. Furthermore, Gerich J [9] argues that cognitive social capital

impacts health by enhancing personal resources such as self-confidence and feelings of safety. As a result, human and social capital works together to increase human wellbeing. This link between human wellbeing and social capital highlights the potential importance of social capital within university life, as it may be particularly stressful for international students dealing with language barriers and any loneliness from moving to a new country. The OSQ is therefore particularly suited as a research case study.

Moreover, communities hugely benefit from the functions of social capital. Putnam and Coleman consider social capital as an important element of social development, with Putnam further identifying the link between educational achievement and the strength of community networks and participation [2]. Furthermore, Putnam RD [10] argues that social capital influences government performance, as well as other social institutions. Moreover, Bjornskov C [11] suggests that there is a strong link between social capital and life satisfaction, based on research examining the relative happiness of countries compared with scores of social capital, including the Netherlands, Iceland and Switzerland. This is supported by a study of social capital in rural China, where the researchers found that there is a positive association between social capital and psychological health, general health, and overall well-being [12]. As the majority of these studies use qualitative research methods, there is a gap for research using more diverse methods such as ethnographic studies, in order to examine the relationship from a different research perspective. A weakness of strict qualitative methodology is the reliance on interviews and focus groups, often influenced by researcher bias in questioning; ethnography includes a range of data collection methods including documents and participant observation, which examines people within their own lived environments without researchers leading discussion.

Social capital also has implications for cultural capital, defined by Lamont M and Lareau A [13] as built on “widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods, and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion”. Cultural capital therefore shapes social networks within a community. For instance, Putnam argues that individual activities are more dominant in American society than participation in collective activities, illustrating a decline in social capital [3]. In contrast, Rice G [14] claims that social interaction is more important within Arab communities compared to American individualistic culture, illustrating a high level of collectivity resulting in social cohesion and loyalty to groups, encouraging social capital. This research has implications for social capital within the Omani community, which emphasises historically strong relationships between families and community networks [2]. Indeed, Sultan (2010) says that in Omani society, relationships between relatives and friends are considered an important source of emotional, psychological and financial support, more than professional counseling.

However, moving from this social context to live abroad requires ways of adapting to a new society. Many students face culture shock, and research shows that it overwhelmingly affects those who move from communities that have high social capital, unless they receive support from their home community. Sandel TL [15] argues that “higher levels of adaptation—associated with fewer problems and a greater sense of well-being—may be due to higher levels of ethnic maintenance”. Sandel TL [15] refers to a New Zealand study where higher levels of “ethnic identity predicted greater life satisfaction,” and higher Muslim identity “predicted fewer behavioral problems”. Furthermore, research by Crosnoe found that there is a link between positive academic achievements and social capital [2]. Moreover, Castaneda ME and Zirger ML [3] argue that social networks give students the opportunity to be involved in the community and build supportive connections. These studies indicate that social capital and cultural support is an important key to student success while studying abroad.

## Methods and Methodology

This research used ethnography, as a member of the OSQ, this methodology allowed the researcher to have a deep understanding of the group sub-culture and the relationship between members, as well as observe the importance of the society in members lives in Queensland. No other

gatekeeper was necessary. Indeed, this immersive, observational method of research allowed the researcher to observe otherwise closed group activities. However, being a member of the group under examination poses a number of ethical questions, including related to bias. To lessen this influence and ensure objective observation, the researcher did not participate in recent OSQ events before this study.

According to Gobo G [16], there is a gap between what people say and what they do, between attitudes and behaviors. To account for this gap, this research incorporated both ethnographic observations and interview methods to provide a clear understanding of social capital within the OSQ, and how it assists members to adapt to university life and the Australian community, if at all. Indeed, the researcher took the role of ‘observer as participant’, as “it is most appropriate when the researcher has something in common with the members of the group” [17]. This is particularly relevant as the researcher is a member of the OSQ, and shares a similar cultural background to insiders. Furthermore, this research conducted semi-structured interviews due to the rich volume of data they can uncover. The interview questions were designed to explore these themes of personal experiences, attitudes and conceptions of the OSQ in order to generate greater understanding of how they relate to the group and the ways in which it assists them. They consisted of 10 open-ended questions lasting around 25 minutes.

A purposive sampling method was selected for this research. This sampling method was most appropriate for this research as it sought to examine if the OSQ has any impact on members’ adaptation and integrating into university life and the Australian community. Thus, the studies sample consisted of two unpaid Omani students studying at the University of Queensland (UQ), who are also members of the OSQ. Participants were approached by email. One interview was conducted with a member who has been studying at UQ for more than a year with his family, to explore the OSQ’s long-term effects on the members’ life, as well as their families’. The second interview was carried out with a new single member of the OSQ to compare the first participant with a ‘fresh experience’. This selection is intentional, as there are activities more oriented to families and children, and others to singles. Ethics are important to consider when designing any social research. This research was carried out under the University’s Ethical Code. Data analysis was conducted per a thematic analysis, themes were grounded in the actual data gathered by the observations and interviews, assisting to thoroughly understand the data and how it relates to the research questions. After coding the research data, two broader themes emerged.

## Findings

Based on the thematic analysis of the interviews and observations data, the research shows that OSQ supports its members, both singles and families, to adapt to university life and integrate within Australian culture. Indeed, there are two main findings of this study that relate to OSQ and social capital. These are emotional connection and cultural distinction.

### Emotional connection

Firstly, the research provides evidence that emotional connection among members has a key role in supporting them to adapt to studying and the Australian community. For instance, the observations showed that members were speaking and joking in Arabic, and laughing and smiling were common in their conversations and activities. Both interview participants reported that the society provides them with an atmosphere where they can express their feelings in their first language, therefore feeling at home. Interviewee (A) stated that ‘Talking in Arabic as good opportunity for fun and saying jokes’, echoed by interviewee (B) explaining that ‘We need to speak in Arabic to express our feelings’. This might be due to a desire to hide their feelings while studying during the week, and not being proficient in English enough to communicate their anxiety. Indeed, Horwitz EK [18] argues that “speaking publicly in the target language has been found to be extremely anxiety-provoking for many students”.

Moreover, due to sharing the same language, cultural background, and being away from their homes, the feeling of commonality and acceptance from other group members results in a sense of support and comradeship. Sarason

IG, et al. [19] argues that "People high in perceived support generally have a sense that they are accepted by others". This support has an impact on their university achievements, as the interviewees stated that they receive advice and guidance from other members to be successful in their studies. Interviewee (A) reports that they "have got some advices in studying and how achieving high grade and learning how to be successful". This is important because, as Dennis JM, et al. [20] argues, "Existing evidence from researchers in higher education suggests that peer support may be extremely important for the academic adjustment of college students". Moreover, Dennis JM, et al. [20] found in their study that "many students reported that peer support was the most helpful strategy for dealing with academic problems". Indeed, knowing that support is available and has been offered "may reduce the personal insecurities often accompany low levels of perceived support" [19]. As interviewee (B) states, "if I get in trouble I will go to them [OSQ's members], they are as my parents", adding that participating in activities enhances his confident. This supports Gerich J [9] findings where he argues that cognitive social capital impacts health by enhancing personal resources such as self-confidence and feelings of safety. Therefore, this emotional connection among members helps them feel secure at university. Indeed, this also links to the nature of Omani culture, where relationships between relatives and friends are considered an important source of emotional, psychological and financial support, more than professional counseling [21]. Moreover, it corroborates Salovey and Mayer's in Brooks K and Nafukho FM [22] argument that "new theories suggest that emotions play an important role in organizing, motivating, and directing human activity". Thus, social capital within the OSQ plays a vital role in members lives. Indeed, the characteristics of supporting each other are based on their culture.

### Cultural distinction

Secondly, the cultural distinction of this society is in representing the Omani culture, and was more obvious from the observations. The interviewees also felt that this society represents their home culture. This gives members the feeling that they do not miss their identity or culture, and is critical to their adaptation. For example, members act according to their cultural norms at gatherings, which give members the feeling of belonging within the society. This included standing up when greeting someone and shaking his hand, sitting on the floor or grass while eating or chatting, using the right hand for eating, and providing food and activities traditional within Omani culture. Therefore, cultural capital in the OSQ shapes social networks per their cultural heritage.

Moreover, celebrating national and religious ceremonies like the Omani national day and Eids enhances their sense of unity, and alleviates feelings of being away from home where these celebrations are culturally important. For example, when asked about the importance of the OSQ to him, interviewee (A) stated that "It helped to settle down, reduce homesickness, and celebrate our national and religious events and ceremonies such as Eid alfitr, and Oman national day". Indeed, both participants agreed that it would be more difficult to adapt and be successful in their studies without the OSQ. As interviewee (A) emphasizes, "It may increase homesick, make studying and living in Australia more challenging and get more troubles here". Interviewee (B) said that he "will feel sorry and sad if here is not like these gatherings". This illustrates that, as mentioned before, social interaction within Arab communities has a high level of collectivity which encourages social capital [14]. Moreover, Omani society has historically strong relationships between families and community networks [2]. The OSQ provides members with an environment where they can practice and feel their culture, emotionally supporting them to adapt in their studies and integrate within the Australian community.

However, social capital as evident within the OSQ might not be as effective in addressing emotional and social needs in other cultures. Moreover, there are personal exceptions where some Omani students might not interact with the OSQ; however, it is argued that the OSQ remains an important tool for them while in studying at the University of Queensland, if they need support.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the importance of this research was to examine whether

there is a relationship between social capital within small community groups and members' adaptation to new cultural landscapes. Many international students face culture shock and find achieving cultural adjustment, being the maintenance of individual psychological wellbeing balanced against appreciation of the host culture, challenging [23]. However, it is evident from this study that there is a positive link between social capital and adaptation for the OSQ's members. This social capital reflects the Omani culture, and becomes critically important for members' lives while here. For example, the emotional connection among them reflects the importance of family and community ties. This feeling gives them emotional security and supports them to adapt easily in the new culture, as well as succeed in their studies. Moreover, the importance of social capital in the research findings corroborates the dominant theory that stresses the importance of networks, norms, relationships, trust, and identity for the creation and sharing of knowledge [5]. Furthermore, the research indicates that it affects members study success, supporting Putnam's link between educational achievement and the strength of community networks and participation [2]. In addition, supporting Castaneda ME and Zirger ML [3] theory, the research shows that networks give students the opportunity to be involved in the community and build supportive connections. Therefore, the results of this research may encourage the formation of new social clubs to assist students in their cultural transition and academic achievements through fostering social capital. Moreover, this study opens new ground for social capital theory and adaptation.

## Conflict of Interest

None.

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