

## **WOMEN'S DIALOG AND DISTANCE LEARNING: A University in the Arab World**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to identify the relationship between the Arab women's dialog and their perceptions of distance education, their personal relevance with the distance education paradigm, and their life affiliations within a distance education environment.

*Aspects of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory* were investigated in this study. Transactional distance education occurs in an environment when teachers and learners are separated. This separation deals with learners' and teachers' behaviors and affects both.

This study is a descriptive study employed a mix of methods. A sample of 150 active female learners at the Al-Quds Open University in Paletsine-Gaza Strip Branch was surveyed. A response rate of 80% was obtained. Furthermore, eight females from the responses were telephone interviewed. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations were calculated to identify significant relationships of life affiliations, personal relevance satisfaction, and perception of distance education dimensions towards female students' dialog in a distance education setting. The findings indicated that life affiliations had no significant differences on the women's dialog measures through distance education. However, the personal relevance and the perceptions about distance education were significantly related to the concept of women's dialog.

**Keywords:** Aspects of Moore's; the women's dialog; transactional distance theory; women in distance education.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Distance education is a growing trend in all regions of the world. There are more than 850 institutions around the world delivering education at a distance (Alsunbul, 2002; D'Orise & Day, 2006). Enrollments have increased tremendously since 1995 (Hunter, 2007). The majority of distance learners are adult women (Hunter, 2007). Currently, there are more than 3.48 million online students in United States of America, and probably more than 10 million enrolled students who receive distance education services across the world (Storey & Tebes, 2008). Distance education has a very short history in the Arab world (Abdul Gani & Al Otaibi, n.d.).

Dual, single, and virtual are three modes of open distance learning institutions in the Arab world: Dual Mode refers to institutions that have offered education through distance as well as on-campus. UNSECO (2002, 25) stated, "in dual mode, institutions there may be an administrative staff whose sole responsibilities are distance education, but usually it is the teachers of the parent body who provide the teaching".

The Open Learning Centers in Egypt, the Distance Education Center of Juba University in Sudan, and the Open Learning Centers in Syria are examples of Arab institutions that have offered distance education using the dual mode (Abdul Gani & Al Otaibi, n.d.; Mohamed, 2005).

Single Mode refers to institutions that have dedicated their activities based on the need for distance education. UNSECO (2002, 25) stated, "single mode institutions are those in which distance education is the sole mission, to which teachers and administrative staff are exclusively dedicated, course development, instruction, evaluation and other educational processes are tailored to the distant learner". Al-Quds Open University (QOU) in Palestine is an example of a single mode distance education university that aims to meet the needs of Palestinian students (Abdul Gani & Al Otaibi, n.d.; Mohamed, 2005).

Virtual Mode refers to institutions that have offered distance education totally online such as Syrian Virtual University (SVU) (Abdul Gani & Al Otaibi, n.d.; Mohamed, 2005). Al-Radhi (2008, para 17) stated, "virtual refers to local universities that aim to provide world-class education without boundaries so that students do not have to leave their countries to study abroad".

Because of traditional, social, and religious affiliations (Velloso, 1996), the majority of women in rural areas within the Arab world cannot physically attend classes at traditional universities (Palestine Solidarity Campaign, 2007). Furthermore, one of the major obstacles that keep women from achieving higher educational degrees is that they get married at a young age right after high school, and become housewives.

The purpose of this study was to explore and identify the relationship between the Arab women's dialog in a distance education setting, and satisfaction in meeting their personal goals (e.g., self-worth, self-esteem, and self-confidence). Furthermore, the study identified the impact of the Arab women's life affiliations (e.g., culture, society, and religion) on their dialog in a distance education environment.

The Arab women's perception of distance education was identified. The study took place in Palestine. Palestine is sometimes known as the Holy Land. Until 1948, the area was under British rule and was called Palestine. In 1948, the state of Israel was established, and since then battles have been fought over the land (Bergan, 2000). People in Palestine face daily challenges in achieving an education because of the political environment (Lorenzetti, 2007).

## EFFECTS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION ON WOMEN

Distance education has been seen as a potential solution to help women achieve their educational goals. Due to its flexibility, innovative learning methods are needed (Hammad, Sarie, & Al-Ayyoub, 2004; Gokool-Ramdoos, 2005; Kwapong, 2007). Education opens the opportunities and choices for women to work and to become more self-confident (Ojo & Olakulein, 2006). Bukhsh (2007) explained that education is the key factor in empowering women to take their rightful place in society.

Moreover, education gives status and confidence in decision-making. Studies showed that women with low educational levels are affected by limited career opportunities, and women who pursue higher education gain more career opportunities (Haque & Batool, 1999; Kwapong, 2007).

## LEARNERS' DIALOG AND THEIR PERSONAL RELEVANCE SATISFACTION

Numerous studies have investigated the relationship between learners' satisfaction and their interaction to distance education courses. Some of those studies supported the positive relationship between students' interaction and their satisfaction in an online course. (Biggs, 2006; Herbert, 2006; Jung et al., 2002; Kelsey & D'souza, 2004; Müller, 2008; Sahin, 2007; Stein et al., 2005; Swan, 2003). Other studies did not support the

importance of teacher-to-learner interaction or learner-to- learner interaction in a distance learning setting (Anderson, 2003; Sabry & Baldwin, 2003; Shehab, 2007; Wyatt, 2005). The satisfaction of women as learners occurs from interactions with their classmates and instructors (Furst-Bowe, 2002; Müller, 2008; Kwapong, 2007; Richardson & Swan, 2003). Müller's study (2008) found that women often felt burdened by taking care of children and other family members at the same time as working and continuing their education via distance. Interaction gave women the ability to improve their personal growth. Teachers' support is extremely helpful in increasing individual students' confidence and competence to accomplish educational goals in a learning environment (Makoe, 2007). A study of 400 distance women learners from a university in Ghana was conducted by Kwapong (2007). This study indicated that, by nature, women learn best in groups and interaction. Their confidence and personal satisfaction increase when they interact with their teachers and peers. In general, women are satisfied with distance learning. This learning seems to enable women to balance school, work, and family demands (Furst-Bowe, 2002).

### **Learners' Dialog and Life Affiliations**

Cultural context has an impact on learners' interactions in distance education settings (Usun, 2006). Cultural values have powerful constraints on individual behavior which could limit achieving goals and the success of reflective practices in the academic arena (Richardson, 2004). Kramarae (2003) pointed out that students often find the lack of social aspects can be a challenge for women for self-direction in a distance learning environment. Kramarae (2003) noted in the "Digital Divide" portion of her study that many communication differences seem to be cultural or individual, not gender- based. Although, some students expressed problems with gender and communication, many students addressed other factors, such as culture and age, had more significant barriers to online communication.

Studies found that there are relationships between learners' success in any academic environment and certain emotional, social, and academic supports (Ford, 2003; Gokool-Ramdoe, 2005). Ford's study (2003) indicated that culture affiliations influence learners' interactions. Gokool-Ramdoe (2005) reported a significant relationship between societal support and women interaction in a distance education environment. In Ghana, due to social and economic issues, women have limited access to higher education (Kwapong, 2007).

Islam supports education for both males and females. Islam has not held women back when it comes to obtaining an education (Rogers & Howell, 2004; Academy for Educational Development, 2002). Muslim countries, like Indonesia, Nigeria, China, and some Arab-Islamic governments make good use of education (Rogers & Howell, 2004).

However, in rural areas, women are kept from access to education due to the Islamic practice of Purdah, a custom that confines them to their homes unless escorted by a chaperone (Ojo & Olakulein, 2006).

In the Muslim culture, societies obey a strict code of behavior where women are protected from public display (Richardson, 2004).

Muslim women have less education because of social and cultural restrictions. Assil (2005, 53) stated:

*Kuwaiti women, despite their social advancement throughout the years, continue to be legally defined as family members, whose rights and responsibilities are circumscribed by their roles as mothers, wives and daughters and are still subject to the discretions of their fathers, brothers, and husbands. ... While some do go abroad for a university education, a*

*much greater number of women in Kuwait are not permitted to do so by their families or husbands, and furthermore, cannot obtain travel documents and visas without their father's authorization to do so.*

Al-Harathi (2005) reported on a study that was conducted to provide experiences in distance education of Arab graduate students pursuing degree programs in the United States. The following are the highlighted findings of Al-Harathi's (2005) study:

- Muslim women felt more comfortable participating in distance education than face-to-face courses. Distance education would make it easier for Muslim women to participate in educational settings in the Arab Gulf States.
- In the Arab culture, the relationship between genders is limited not only by religion, but by cultural traditions as well.
- Cultural differences can influence the dialog in a distance education environment.
- Learners' Dialog and Perception

Numerous studies indicated that students generally hold a positive perception towards distance learning (Anderson & Haddad, 2005; Koohang & Durante, 2003; Ojo & Olakulehin, 2006a). Interaction plays an important role with learners' perception and helps them become more involved in the learning process (Black, 2005; Moody, 2004; Sahin, 2008; Steinman, 2007). Steinman (2007, 46) asserted that "perceptions of online courses can be negative if they experience large transactional distance with the instructor and with other students and can influence whether a student will stay in or drop out of a class."

There is a high relationship between students' perception and their dialog in a distance learning environment (Barnard, Paton & Rose, 2007; Huang, 2002; Picciano, 2002). Students who have high levels of communication and collaboration tend to have more positive perceptions (Barnard, Paton, & Rose, 2007). Communication can affect how students perceive their online education experience (Moody, 2004).

Interaction between teachers and students is needed in a successful online course.

Interaction with other students and instructors can help online learners to achieve more out of their classes.

Instructors of online learning play important roles in creating a comfortable distance learning environment (Sargeant et al., 2006).

## THE METHOD

### Theoretical Framework

Theory is important to conduct a study in the area of distance education because it directly impacts the practice in the field (Shehab, 2007). Transactional Distance Theory (TDT) appeared in 1972 (Moore, 1997), which was the basis for this study. TDT provides a framework of the pedagogy of distance education in an environment when teachers and learners are separated. According to the theory, the degree of communication between any learner and an instructor is never exactly the same. The TDT is a continuous rather than a discrete variable, a relative rather than an absolute term.

It identifies and describes teaching and learning approaches that do not take place in a specific site. Instructors and learners take place in different locations via distance education.

Structure, dialog, and learner autonomy are the core variables of TDT. Shehab (2007, 35) stated that "the purpose of the theory of transactional distance was to summarize the different relationships and the strength of relationship among and between these variables that make up the transactional distance.

"According to Moore (1997; 2007), structure involves the actual design of the course and the use of various media such as printed materials, CD, or teleconferences. Adult learners are self-starters who decide to be involved in the course of study. Thus, the instructor needs to address learners' culture, so learners can share learning experiences (Simonson et al., 2009).

Autonomy involves learners and the ability to have a personal learning plan that refers to self-directedness. Individuals have different degrees of interactions that depend upon their degree of autonomy. Learners with high autonomy can cope with any degree of dialog.

On the other hand, learners with low autonomy need a high degree of dialog to minimize the transactional distance (Moore, 1997). Dialog involves communication and interaction between learners and teachers.

Dialog occurs in different formats. Anderson (2007) addressed those dialog formats as the following:

- Learner-to-teacher interaction occurs when a teacher starts to gather information and discovers as much as possible about the learner. Interaction between a teacher and learners also occurs through emails or via telephones. Students need to feel comfortable and want to be able to get in touch with their instructor as it is needed. The teacher, on the other hand, needs to encourage students and make them feel that he/she is always ready to help.
- Learner-to-learner interaction occurs when a learner is working with group of two or more on a project, the instructor divides the students into sub clusters (or groups) and individual assignments are peer reviewed.
- Learner-to-content interaction occurs when all available technologies are used to provide a variety of media for student interaction such as text, audio, graphics, or video.

There were studies which were conducted about the relationship between learners' perceptions of transactional distance and their satisfaction in a distance education setting (Huang, 2000; Sahin, 2006; Shehab, 2007). Huang (2000) found that there is a positive significant relationship between interface (delivery system) and interaction, course structure, and learner autonomy dimensions. Shehab (2007) investigated the relationship between learners' satisfaction and the perception dimensions such as the course interaction, the learner's autonomy provided in the course, the course structure, the quality of instructional methods, and the course interface. Shehab (2007) found that there is a significant relationship between learner autonomy, interaction, course structure and learners' satisfaction.

However, Sahin (2006) pointed out that transactional distance theory is somewhat weak in explaining the course structure.

### **Research Design**

A descriptive study and correlational research design was used in this study. Themes were identified to determine possible significant relationships between the concept of Women's Dialog (WD) dimension and other dimensions (i.e., Women's Personal Relevance

and Satisfaction (WPRS), Women's Life Affiliations (WLA), and Women's Perception of Distance Learning (WPDL).

The data was analyzed to identify significant relationships among those themes and the female students' dialog in a distance education setting based on the TDT defined by Moore (1997).

### **Instruments**

Two Instruments were adapted in this study. One instrument is Distance Education Learning Environment Survey (DELES), which was developed and validated by Walker (2003). The survey was used to measure distance learning environment aspects including students' interaction (dialog), instructors' support, students' personal relevance satisfaction, and students' perceptions of their distance learning environment. A 5-point Likert-type set of ordered alternatives (never, seldom, sometimes, often, always) was used to provide the respondents' feedback.

A section was added to the original instrument to gather basic demographic data such as age, gender, marital status, religion, and employment status. Walker's (2003) instrument consists of 34 statements about practices in a distance learning environment. Besides demographic information, only 25 statements from Walker's instrument and six statements from Hopper's (2000) questionnaire were used for developing the Women Dialog and Distance Learning Survey (WDDLs). The content validity for WDDLs was examined by experts in distance education. Content validity is not determined by a formula or computations but by expert evaluation (Fink (2002; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). The survey was sent to seven professors at Nova Southeastern University to evaluate the content validity of the instrument. The purpose of doing this pilot study was to:

- Identify the extent to which the instrument covered all objectives of the research.
- Get experts' feedback on the format of the questionnaire.
- Identify the clarity of each item to the reader.
- Identify the appropriateness of each item in reference to its dimension indicator.
- Rank the importance of each item according to its relevance dimension in order to reduce the number of questions if needed.

The survey revisions were made in accordance with pilot testers' feedback. In the introduction section, a few words were added to explain some of the terms such as personal relevance. The demographic section was updated; additional questions were added to be more specific about the religion statement, and two of the statements were discarded or modified for consistency. The reliability was conducted by using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which estimates the internal consistency reliability. The reliability score was 0.85, which is considered a high degree of internal consistency.

The other instrument is an in-depth semi-structured telephone interview. The purpose of using this interview was to provide "reasonably standard data across respondents, but for greater depth than can be obtained from a structured interview" (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007, 246). Only 11 questions were adapted from Hopper's (2000) questionnaire, which consists of 64 questions. The 11 questions were distributed under three subsections with reference to life affiliation, personal relevance satisfaction, and women's dialog; and a section of demographic information was added.

### **Participants**

The WDDLs participation was distributed voluntary to female students who were enrolled in June, 2009 at Al-Quds Open University (QOU) in Palestine, Gaza Strip center. This institution offers blended format (distance and face-to-face) courses and programs. Participants' responses were not necessarily representative of other female learners in

the QOU. This may cause lack of representation of rural areas or different centers that may have significant input. In addition, the sample for this study was derived from a center of an institution that has 22 centers across Gaza Strip and the West Bank; the results may not be generalized to other female learners. Thus, the analysis of the data presented general patterns but does not give detailed statistical information.

### Procedures

The study employed qualitative and quantitative research techniques to identify themes (e.g., life affiliations, personal relevance satisfaction, and perception of distance learning) and their impact on women's perceptions of the distance learning interaction. The simple random sampling was presented by distributing the survey to the first 150 female students who were on the campus. Due to the political issues that are occurring in Palestine and to the participants' limited access to technology, the study was conducted through distance.

A manager, who was one of the male students on the campus, was authorized to administrate the study. The WDDLs and a consent form for conducting the telephone interview were sent to the manager through email. The WDDLs was distributed in Arabic to the 150 female students. Participants were asked to fill out the survey voluntarily, sign the consent form if they are interested in participating in the telephone interview, and insert the completed survey and the consent form in their envelope. To increase the rate of engagement, the manager explained the importance of the study for women in higher education and encouraged them to participate and return the completed survey at their convenience. Completed surveys were gathered and mailed to the researcher. Statistical analyses were conducted such as descriptive and Pearson correlations.

From the 120 respondents to the WDDLs, only nine females signed the interview consent form to participate with the telephone interview, but the researcher was able to contact only eight subjects. The interview was scheduled for the selected participants and lasted for approximately twenty minutes. The telephone interviews were recorded. The data was collected in Arabic and translated into English manually. The analysis of the telephone interview data followed thematic and emerged techniques (Burke & Miller, 2001; Gall et al., 2007). The process of analyzing the data was:

- Codes were assigned to individual participants to respect their privacy and confidentiality.
- Identification of themes were performed manually and determined based on the predefined questionnaire sections.
- The identified themes were emerged into logical dimensions of similar phenomena.
- Dimensions were analyzed to answer the research questions.
- The results were compared to the existing research literature to confirm fit.

### RESULT FINDINGS

This section reports the findings from the 120 (80%) research respondents who completed the WDDLs and the eight telephone interviews for those who agreed to participate in. Analyses were conducted for descriptive tests and Pearson correlations ( $r$ ). Data analyses were performed using SPSS version 14.

#### *Demographic Description*

The demographic questions asked about age, educational level, marital status, number of children, religion, and employment status. The findings indicated that the majority of Palestinian females who attain higher education through distance are averaged in age of 25 years old ; singles; do not have children; unemployed; and embracing Islam (see Table 1., Table 2.).

**Table 1.**  
**Mean and SD of Participants' Age**

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<b>Age</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>24.56</b>	<b>6.27</b>

*Note.* N=120, two participants chose not to provide their age. Minimum age=18, and maximum age=53.

### **Research Question 1**

#### ***What is The Relationship Between Women's Dialog And Their Personal Relevance Satisfaction In A Distance Education Environment?***

To respond to this question, respondents were asked to complete a Likert-type scale (Never=1, seldom=2, sometimes=3, often=4, always=5) and select the appropriate scale for the 13 statements of the WD dimension and the four statements of the WPRS dimension (see Table 3) that applied to them. The purpose of WD was to explore the concept of women's dialog (Instructor-Interaction & Other fellow Student-Interaction) while the purpose of the WPRS was to measure respondents' personal relevance, confidence, and self-esteem in a distance learning environment. Pearson Correlation (*r*) was examined among WD, WPRS, and the continuous variables (e.g., age, educational level, and number of children) as presented in Table 4.

The findings indicated that there is a positive significant correlation ( $r=.32$ ) at the  $p < .01$  level of women's personal relevance satisfaction toward the concept of their dialog in a distance learning environment. There was not any significant correlation between the continuous variables and both WD and WPRS dimensions (see Table 4).

The more students (regardless of their age, educational level, or number of children they have) interact with instructors and fellow students, the highest personal relevance satisfaction (e.g, confidence, self esteem, and self worth) they will gain.

**Table 2.**  
**Frequently and Percentage for Educational Level, Religion, Employed, Marital Status, and Number of Children per Participant**

<b>Variables</b>	<b><i>N</i></b>	<b><i>%</i></b>
<b>Educational Level</b>		
Level – 1	7	5.9
Level – 2	25	21
Level – 3	54	45.4
Level – 4	33	27.7
<b>Religion</b>		
Islam	119	99.2
Christianity	1	0.8
<b>Employed</b>		
Yes	27	22.5
No	92	76.7
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	81	67.5
Married	32	26.7
Divorced	6	5.0
Widow	1	0.8
<b>Children</b>		

Yes	31	25.8
No	89	74.2
<b>Number of Children</b>		
One	6	20.0
Two	4	13.3
Three	9	30.0
Four	3	10.0
Six	3	10.0
Seven	3	10.0
Eight	2	6.7

*Note.* N=120. One participant chose not to provide her educational level, and another one did not indicate her employed status. N=30 for number of children reported of those who had children, one participant did not indicate the number of her children. Level – 1=first academic year in the program, Level – 2=second academic year in the program, Level – 3=third academic year in the program, and Level – 4=fourth academic year in the program.

**Table 3.**  
Mean, SD, for the WD, WPRS, WLA, and WPDL dimensions

	N	# of items	M	SD
WD	117	13	3.35	.64
WPRS	119	4	3.90	.65
WLA	118	6	3.04	1.19
WPDL	116	8	3.11	.94

*Note.* N=120, three participants chose not to complete all women's dialog statements, one participant chose not to complete all women's personal relevance and satisfaction

statements, two participants chose not to complete all life affiliations statements, and four participants chose not to complete all women's perception of distance learning statements. WD=Women's Dialog, WPRS =Women's Personal Relevance Satisfaction, WLA=Women's Life Affiliations, and WPDLWomen's Perception of Distance Learning.

Furthermore, the interviewed women emphasized the importance of their interaction to instructors and local fellow students through face-to-face or distance. Learners' interaction with instructors helps them to improve their encouragement, motivation and the quality of learning outcome. Students' satisfaction of their interactions with their instructor related to learning outcome. The more students interact with instructors, the easier the class's preparation will be. Women in the study were asked to describe the nature of their interactions with their instructor from main campus and through distance. They asserted:

*I do see the instructor applies an important role in distance education to motivate and encourage the students. I am in my third year, if I did not observe the motivation and the responses to my questions, I would not continue. Also, through the university portable, there are always discussion sessions between the students and the instructor and I found them very helpful.* (AB, personal communication, July 10, 2009)

*My interaction with my instructors helped a lot in increasing my GPA. Instructors' interaction helps to increase the quality level of education. Students need the instructors' interaction; it is necessary.* (NR, personal communication, July 10, 2009)

*I feel separation, I do not know my instructors, I do not have any interaction between me and the instructor and that effect me. Big different between a student who have a teacher*

*support and help and other one do not have any interaction with the instructor. It is very challenging.* (SH, personal communication, July 10, 2009)

Students expressed that they have an adequate satisfaction about their interaction with local fellow students. Students' satisfaction with their fellow students applies more toward building social relationships and networking. The more interaction between students, the highest personal relevance satisfaction (e.g., confidence, self esteem, and self worth) they will gain.

*There are a social relationship and networking between students. ... Before any exams, we usually get together to learn from each other and review for the exams. ... Now I feel I am an active individual in my society, people value me more. My self-esteem has increased as well as my confidence. In the future, I will be a teacher and I will assist in building a better society.* (AB, personal communication, July 10, 2009)

### Research Question 2

#### ***What Is The Relationship Between Women's Dialog And Their Perceptions of Distance education?***

To respond to this question, respondents were asked to complete a Likert-type scale (Never=1, seldom=2, sometimes=3, often=4, always=5) and select the appropriate scale for the 13 statements of the WD dimension and the eight statements of the WPDL dimension (see Table 3) that applied to them.

The WPDL dimension looked at how women perceived distance learning. Pearson Correlation ( $r$ ) was examined among WD, WPDL, and the continuous variables (e.g., age, educational level, and number of children) as presented in Table 4. Correlation found to be positively significant ( $r=.32$ ) at the  $p < .01$  level of women's perceptions of distance education toward the concept of their dialog. There was not any significant correlation between the continuous variables and both WD and WPDL dimensions (see Table 4). Students who interact with instructors and peers tend to positively perceive distance learning environment. The analysis of telephone interview supported the quantitative results.

There is a positive relationship between learners' perceptions of distance education and their interaction with both students and instructors. Students who interact with instructors and peers tend to positively perceive distance learning environment. Interviewed women shared their perception of distance education:

*Distance education was the solution for my situation as a wife and mother of three children. I do not have to attend the lecture. ...Distance education method is suitable for me. ... Students who have questions need to contact the instructor through the university portable, emails, phone or even meeting in his/her office; ....instructor always responses to the questions... there is more interaction via distance than face-to-face. Instructors are very helpful via distance. I see this interaction is necessary and beneficial for students. .. There is very helpful and strong relationship between students. Before any exam, we usually get together to learn from each other and review for the exams.* (AB, personal communication, July 10, 2009)

*Distance education helps me to think out of the box and to be independent. The instructor and students both has to collaborate...Distance education helps in many things. It gives opportunity for everyone to pursue education. It is the solution for working and married women. Women who finished high school many years ago, now, they are attending the Open University... If I ask my instructors question, usually I get the answer, which is helpful. ....The interaction between students is very helpful.* (GH, personal communication, July 10, 2009)

**Table 4.**  
**Pearson correlation(r) for predicting the correlation among**  
**WD, WPRS, WLA, WPD, age, educational level, and number of children**

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. WD	--	.32**	.03	.32**	-.03	.05	.25
2. WPRS		--	.11	.23*	.09	.02	.07
3. WLA			--	.14	-.07	.18	-.08
4. WPD				--	.18	-.07	.06
5. Age					--	.28**	.68**
6. Educational Level						--	.03
7. # of Children							--

*Note.* \* Donated the significant correlation at the  $p < .05$  level (2-tailed), and \*\* donated the significant correlation at the  $p < .01$  level (2-tailed). WD=Women's Dialog, WPRS =Women's Personal Relevance Satisfaction, WLA=Women's Life Affiliations, and WPD=Women's Perception of Distance Learning.

### Research Question 3

#### ***What Is The Relationship Between Women's Dialog And Their Life Affiliations Such As Society, Culture, And Religion?***

To answer this question, respondents were asked to complete a Likert-type scale (Never=1, seldom=2, sometimes=3, often=4, always=5) and select the appropriate scale for the 13 statements of the WD dimension and the six statements of the WLA dimension (see Table 3) that applied to them. The WLA measured the impact of religion, culture, and society on women in a distance learning environment. Pearson Correlation (r) was examined among WD, WLA, and the continuous variables (e.g., age, educational level, and number of children) as shown in Table 4. Correlation found to be insignificant ( $r=.03$ ) at the  $p < .01$  level of life affiliation (e.g., religion, culture, and society) toward the concept of women's dialog. There was not any significant correlation between the continuous variables and both WD and WLA dimensions (see Table 4). In this study, life affiliations did not influence the dialog in a distance education environment.

All interviewed women supported the WDDLS results that life affiliations (e.g., religion, culture, and society) did not influence their involvement to attain higher education through distance. However, some students reported that religion, society, and culture in the Arab world put rules for collaboration between genders, which is limiting their interaction. One of the interviewed women expressed her feelings towards the influence of Islam on her education:

*No, my religion did not influence me, but it may have an effect on others because the university is open, and both genders are mixed. Thus, some students said Muslim girls should not collaborate with boys. Prophet Mohammed Peace and prayers be upon him encouraged pursuing education anywhere in the world. I always apply the good things for my education.* (HB, personal communication, July 10, 2009)

Society and culture had directly influenced the involvement of women, who were married and had children while attaining their education. Their domestic roles limited their involvements.

However, distance education was the solution for them. "Yes, the society and my living situations affect my involvement in the program. I am married and I have three children. Thus, distance education was the solution for me." (AB, personal communication, July 10, 2009). Overall, religion, society and culture may affect women's dialog in a traditional

(face-to-face) environment. Thus, distance learning was the solution to overcome this obstacle for most women.

*My society did not influence my involvement in this program. My society provides verities of opportunities for women to pursue their education in any major. I preferred Al-Quds Open University because the university has freedom and flexibility. Each individual can maintain his/her schedule based on her situation. (NR, personal communication, July 10, 2009).*

## DISCUSSIONS

The study involved female students from a university in the Arab world. Thus, results of this study were generalized only to similar cultures at higher educational institutions in the Arab world. Due to political issues where the setting is located, the researcher conducted this study through distance supervising a male individual who distributed, collected, and mailed the instruments within six weeks due to the political situation in Gaza strip after the Israeli attack in January 2009. Having a male individual presenting the researcher was not necessarily covering various groups of women within the university because often females students do not collaborate with male students and that limited their participation in this study.

Responses to the demographic section in the quantitative instrument indicated that the majority of Palestinian females who attained higher education through distance are average in age of 25 years old, single; do not have children, unemployed, and embracing Islam. Perhaps, the demographic result is related to the economic and political issues that Palestinians people are facing in achieving their educational goals. Distance Open learning system is a solution for economic issues; it is a cost-effective and flexible way of educating people (Khan, n.d.). The use of open and distance education is no longer a matter of choice; it is the only option for some countries due to their social, cultural, economic, and political issues (Khan, n.d). It is very hard to travel from one area to another in Palestine due to security checking points, which cause transportation delays (Lorenzetti, 2007). Salah (1992) explained the mission of the university is to research, design, and implement a way to deliver quality education through distance to help Palestinian people overcome their environmental, political, social, and economical challenges.

In addition, female students who filled out the WDDLS were asked to sign a consent form if they were interested in the telephone interview instrument; only nine of 120 students agreed to sign the consent form and release their personal information due to politics and culture issues. Thus, having a telephone interview instead of face to face interview was not necessary for presenting the global women feedback of distance learning experience.

The findings further explored relationships among the different dimensions. A significantly positive correlation at the  $p < .01$  level found between women's dialog and their personal relevance and satisfaction.

In addition, the qualitative instrument emphasized the importance of women's interaction to their instructors and local fellow students through face-to-face or distance. AB (personal communication, July 10, 2009) asserted:

*However, I do see the instructor applies an important role in distance education to motivate and encourage the students. I am in my third year, if I did not observe the instructors' motivation and the responses to my questions, I wouldn't continue. Also, through the university portable, there are always discussion sessions between the students and the instructor and I found them very helpful.... There are a social*

*relationship and networking between students. ... Before any exam, students usually get together to learn from each other and review for the exams. ... Now, I feel I am an active individual in my society, people value me more. My self-esteem has increased as well as my confidence. In the future, I will be a teacher, and I will assist in building a better society.*

Research pointed to the importance of learners' dialog towards their personal relevance and satisfaction. Multiple studies supported the positive relationship between students' interaction and their satisfaction in an online course (Biggs, 2006; Herbert, 2006; Jung et al., 2002; Kelsey & D'souza, 2004; Müller, 2008; Sahin, 2007; Stein et al., 2005; Swan, 2003). Students' satisfaction has been one important aspect of evaluating the effectiveness of distance learning (Khan, 2005).

A significantly positive correlation at the  $p < .01$  level found between women's dialog and their perception of distance learning. In addition, the qualitative instrument reported a positive relationship between learners' perceptions of distance education and their interaction with both students and instructors.

Students who interact with instructors and peers tend to positively perceive distance learning environment. GH (personal communication, July 10, 2009) pointed:

*Distance education helps me to be independent. The instructor and students both have to collaborate...Distance education gives opportunities for everyone to pursue education. It is the solution for working and married women. Women who finished high school many years ago, now, they are attending the Open University... If I ask my instructors question, usually I get the answer, which is helpful. ....The interaction between students is very helpful.*

The findings supported numerous studies that reported a positive relationship between learners' interaction and their perception towards distance learning (Anderson & Haddad, 2005; Black, 2005; Koohang & Durante, 2003; Moody, 2004; Ojo & Olakulehin, 2006a; Sahin, 2008; Steinman, 2007). This study examined the impact of life affiliation towards women's dialog in a distance learning environment. Correlation found to be insignificant at the  $p < .01$  level of life affiliation (e.g., religion, culture, and society) towards the concept of women's their dialog.

However, the qualitative technique reported that religion, society, and culture in the Arab world are put rules for the collaboration between genders, which is limiting their interaction. In the Arab culture, where Islam is embraced, the relationship between genders is controlled not only by religion, but by cultural traditions as well (Al-Harthy, 2005).

Furthermore, women's domestic roles (e.g., children and spouse) limited their involvements in obtaining traditional education. However, distance education was the solution for them. "Yes, the society and my living situations affect my involvement in the program. I am married and I have three children.

Thus, distance education was the solution for me." (AB, personal communication, July 10, 2009). Overall, religion, society and culture may correlate towards women's dialog in a traditional (face-to-face) environment.

Thus, distance learning was the solution to overcome this obstacle for most women. Muslim women felt more comfortable participating in distance education than face-to-face courses. Distance education would make it easier for Muslim women to participate in

educational settings (Al-Harhi, 2005). In this study, life affiliations did not influence the dialog in a distance education environment.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY**

Based on the findings of the quantitative and the qualitative study, the primary recommendation is the development of strategic plan by the university to improve learners' satisfaction in attaining their education via distance. This plan should include the following:

- Providing hand-on training for both students and faculty on the use of the Internet, so they can communicate comfortably.
- Having high-speed Internet connections to meet the educational needs.
- Providing professional development training for faculty on learners' support, encouragement and motivation to have a successful distance learning environment.
- Implementing varieties of communication tools among students and faculty such as chat, discussion board, phone, or emails.
- Implementing a plan to have all face-to-face lectures available online for students who unable to attend due to their employment status or domestic roles. Perhaps, lectures can be uploaded to the university portable for students to view them at their convenience.
- Invoking for reducing the transactional distance between the instructor and the students. Instructor should send emails on regular basis to remind the students that he/she is available there for them at a specific time. The instructor must provide feedback in timely manner, so students would not feel the separation.
- Providing technical support for students and faculty
- Equipping in the university's library with adequate resources that can be available for student as alternative materials of the textbooks.
- Training faculty members for utilizing new technology.
- Developing ongoing evaluation of learners' satisfaction and dialog, program effectiveness, and faculty skills in using technology.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made for further research:

- Employ mixed methods to provide richer insights and raise more interesting questions for future research
- Apply the study in other Arabic cultures to determine the influences of diverse cultures towards the women's concept of dialog in a distance learning environment.
- Conduct separate studies to determine the effect of well trained faculty for distance education on women's perception and satisfaction in a distance learning environment.
- Conduct a comparison study that explores the impact of life affiliations towards the Arab women's dialog in a distance learning setting versus a traditional setting.
- Conduct a comparison study that address women's perception and satisfaction in a distance learning environment within two different cultures such as the Arab and the United States of America.
- Conduct separate studies to investigate the influences of Arabic family opinions on women's personal relevance and satisfaction in a distance learning environment.
- Evaluate computer's skill levels of the faculty in the QOU and the use of technology into their teaching through distance and the impact of those skills on learners' perception and satisfaction.
- Conduct separate study to determine the impact of the Arab women's motivation on their achievement and personal satisfaction in a distance learning environment.

- Conduct a separate study to address the importance of alternative materials beside the text books to deliver education in a distance learning environment.
- Review the survey and the interview questionnaire items along with the responses data to improve questions. Perhaps, more questions should be added to the WPRS dimension of the quantitative survey. This would increase the reliability of the survey.
- Promote the transactional distance theory for future studies that involve with understanding distance education. Jung (2001, 527) stated, "the transactional distance theory provides a useful conceptual framework for defining and understanding distance education in general and as a source of research hypothesis more specifically." Gorsky and Caspi (2005) pointed out that the transactional distance theory is conceptually important since it addresses that the essential distance in distance education is transactional, not spatial.

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- Women's Dialog and Distance Learning: A university in the Arab World. Paper presented at a symposium for Female Higher Education- Trends and Perspectives, Taibah University, Saudi Arabia, 2010

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