

## SENSE OF UNIVERSITY BELONGING: A CASE STUDY OF AL-QUDS UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

**Bassam Yousef Ibrahim Banat, Omar Taleb Rimawi**

Associate Professor, Department of Applied Sociology, Faculty of Arts, Al-Quds University, Jerusalem- Abu Dies, & Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Education, Al-Quds University, Jerusalem- Abu Dies, PALESTINE.

bbanat@staff.alquds.edu, bassambanat@yahoo.com, orimawi@arts.alquds.edu, rimawiomar@yahoo.com

### ABSTRACT

*The main purpose of the current study was to investigate sense of belonging (SOB) of Al-Quds University students. Index of a 25-item scale was used to measure SOB which was developed by the researchers, based on the SOC model (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), and was administrated to three hundred and sixty-nine students (173 males and 196 females) full-time undergraduate students at Al-Quds University stratifiedly selected. The findings demonstrate that the students of Al-Quds University indicated a moderate level of SOB to their university. Differences were found between gender, place of residency, and academic year; however, SOB has emerged as a significant predictor of students' academic achievement. Implications of the findings of this study, and directions for future empirical research were briefly discussed.*

**Keywords:** Sense of belonging, Al-Quds University, academic achievement, higher education

### INTRODUCTION

The concept of sense of belonging (SOB) has emerged as a key idea that can be found in many disciplines including social sciences, education, psychology, and has also been examined in psychiatry, nursing, geography, anthropology, and religion.

The concept of SOB relates to the feeling of belonging to a group or a community. However, the awareness of such belonging is based on the perception of similarity among members and where reciprocal relations facilitate the satisfaction of individual needs (Sarason, 1974; Abdelkader & Bouslama, 2014; Banat, 2014A).

Sociologically, SOB has been identified as one of the basic human needs and an important component to individuals, family, and society (Winter-Collins & McDaniel, 2000; Krause & Wulff, 2005; Hill, 2006).

The society consists of several communities which interact with one another in a systematic manner and share stable and organized social relations. They share joint interests and goals governed by a group of values, customs, traditions and norms which organize their behavior and relationships to guarantee the survival and sustainability of the society. Every group is characterized by the interest of its members in certain behavioral norms based on their own values so as to distinguish them from members of other societal groups; each group exerts pressure on its members to hold fast to these norms in order to preserve and sustain their group entity (Othman, 1999; Banat, 2014A).

Furthermore, SOB is used to describe feelings of belonging to different kinds of communities, like the local community, the town or city, the neighborhood, the school, and the university. In almost all cultures, university is one of the most important learning environments for students. In this context, Firjani (1998: 3) points out that the benefits, of the essential role played by higher education in the development of developing societies, are much higher than the anticipated economic calculations. Higher education plays a substantial role in the formation of a higher level of human capital in the society. Higher education institutions lay the grounds for the cognitive revolution of knowledge and sophisticated abilities namely, higher levels of human capital which are the main backbones for progress in this century.

## **BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

SOB has been the focus of a considerable number of studies in recent years. SOB is a global concern which refers to the feeling of being part of a group or a place.

Historically, SOB has been considered as a basic human need based on Maslow's (1954) work on human development. In his theory, the notion of belongingness can be explained as a person's third-level need in Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs. Maslow (1954) stated that humans have five general categories of needs, including; physiological needs for survival and sustenance; safety needs for general security; needs to feel that they belong; esteem needs for confidence; and finally the need for self-actualization.

Moreover, the psychologist, Sarason, in his 1974 seminal proposed that psychological SOB became the conceptual center for the psychology of community. He asserted that it is one of the major bases for self-definition. By 1986, it was regarded as a central overarching concept for community psychology (Sarason, 1986; Chavis & Pretty, 1999). According to the classic definition proposed by Sarason (1974), SOB is defined as the sense that one belongs in and is meaningfully part of a larger collective, as a result of which one did not experience sustained feelings of loneliness. On the other hand, Unger and Wandesman (1985: 155) define it as feelings of membership and belongingness and shared socio-emotional ties.

Recently, McMillan and Chavis (1986) proposed a four-dimension model of SOB that is more widely accepted in the literature. In their central theory of SOB, this model includes four elements: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connections. According to McMillan and Chavis (1986) dimensional model, membership refers to the feeling of belonging or a sense of interpersonal relatedness. It provides emotional security and a means of identification, group acceptance, and willingness to sacrifice for the group. Influence allows for individuality while maintaining group unity through conformity. It is a sense that one matters, or can make a difference, in a community and that the community matters to its members. Integration and fulfillment of needs is a realization that individual and community needs are reciprocal. Therefore, this refers to the benefits that people derive from their membership to a community. Also, individuals' needs are fulfilled through membership, and not to the detriment of the community's needs. Shared emotional connection is based on a sense of shared history, shared place, shared experiences, and quality of social interaction that developed over time through positive relationships with other community members (Banat, 2014A).

Although the study of SOB scored its original and significant contribution to sociology, it is widely addressed in education. Also, it highlighted the link between individuals and their learning communities and environment. Goodenow (1992) defines a SOB as the feeling of being included, accepted, and supported by other persons in a school social environment.

Additionally, Hagerty et al. (2002) advanced the concept of SOB by defining it as the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment such that the persons consider themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment. However, the closest and most focused definition for SOB in educational studies was defined by Pintrich and Maehr (2004) as the sense of psychological membership in the school or classroom, that is, the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school environment.

The transfer of a student from the school to the university stage creates new conditions that the student has to adapt to; otherwise, the student will face some maladjustment problems, particularly low level of SOB (Banat, 2015). In this context, Tinto (1993) suggests that students entering university need to adjust to a new cultural environment of study and their ability to acculturate to the academic culture is a significant factor in their SOB. Also, involvement in social and collaborative learning activities and positive interactions with university staff and peers are keys to a student building a resilient identity, and who can participate confidently in an institution and a disciplinary community (Reid & Solomonides, 2007).

According to Marshall et al. (2012), there are many factors that affect the transition of students from secondary school to the first year of higher education. This is based on the fact that this transition is complicated by institutional requirements that oblige them to take foundational or preparatory courses as a prerequisite to registering certain core first-year and lower-division courses. Here, the students may feel they are not accepted as legitimate members of the academic community, which may, in turn, affect their SOB to the institution. Besides, Devlin et al. (2012) outline some of the characteristics of empathic institutional contexts that provide welcoming and engaging experiences for students who may be unfamiliar with university cultures. These characteristics include: value and respect for all students; an institution-wide approach that is comprehensive, integrated and co-ordinated through the curriculum; inclusive learning environments and strategies; a commitment to empowering students by making the implicit, explicit; and a focus on student learning outcomes and success. By the same token, Gardner et al. (2005) showed some of the different effects that a lack of sense of belonging creates, such as greater risk to physical wellbeing.

Consequently, education has important social and cognitive dimensions and occurs most effectively when the university provides a positive social environment with a strong SOB (Krafona, 2014). In this regards, Alawadhi et al. (2011) argued that SOB leads to great benefit in the educational field. Also, it is necessary for educational facilities to foster sense of belonging in students.

In an attempt to measure SOB, Chavis et al. (1986) developed sense of community index (SOCI) that provides a quantitative methodology to evaluate the SOB experienced by an individual within a given community. In the year 1996, Plas and Lewis suggested SOB as an explanatory tool mediating the influence of environmental context toward individual well-being. Moreover, sense of community index (SOCI) which was developed by Perkins, Florin, Rich, Wandersman and Chavis (1990) was able to measure the four components of SOB (Abdelkader & Bouslama, 2014; Banat, 2014A).

In a similar study in the educational field by Goodenew (1993), an instrument was created to measure the concept of SOB based on respect and encouragement for participation, involvement of the perceived responses of other members, and being part of the society. Lounsbury and DeNeui (1995) transformed the Sense of Community Index (SOCI) by Chavis et al. (1986) into the Campus Atmosphere Scale that was adapted to a great extent. Recently,

Hoffman et al. (2002) developed several measures of SOB that includes students' perceptions of academic and social support, social interactions, isolation, and comfort variables.

Previous literature has measured sense of belonging through several variables. In a recent study, Banat (2014A) concluded that Palestinians have experienced a strong level of sense of community belonging. From an educational point of view, the study of Krafona (2014) showed a low sense of belonging of the University of Cape Coast students.

In a qualitative study of university students from nontraditional backgrounds and academics, the study of Thomas et al. (2014) concluded that SOB was found as a characteristic highly valued in online courses. Furthermore, Bloomquist (2014) found that a majority of the commuter freshmen did report feelings of belonging; and responses relating to feelings of not belonging were correlated with lower first-semester self-reported GPAs.

Moreover, Marshall et al. (2012) found that the participants' perceptions of SOB are multi-layered and context-dependent, relating to changes in time and space, classroom pedagogy, and other social, cultural, and linguistic factors. The study of Alawadhi et al. (2011) found that landmark and route knowledge were significantly predicting sense of belonging.

Furthermore, Meeuwisse et al. (2010) concluded that ethnic minority students' SOB to the institution did not contribute to their study progress. On the other hand, in majority students, informal relationships with fellow students were what led to a SOB. While the study of Mohamad et al. (2006) showed that the distance learners indicated low level of SOB. Thus, differences were found between genders. However, SOB did not show any significant correlation with the students' academic achievement.

To sum up, SOB deals greatly with human behavior and the interaction with the surrounding environment, which is in the current study an academic environment of Al-Quds University as perceived by the students. According to McInnis (2002), the multidimensional perspective of SOB is an important value for students to carry especially those in the higher learning institution, since the group is made up of mostly adult that has already understood the concept of unity. However, SOB would not always be positive where there is a possibility of conflicts.

## **PURPOSE AND SCOPE**

Although a great deal of studies has been conducted on SOB, very little is available in regard to higher education in the Palestinian conflicted society. According to McInnis (2002) the multidimensional perspective of SOB is an important value for students to carry especially whom in the higher learning institution, since the group is mostly adult that has already understand the concept of unity. However SOB would not always be positive where there is a possibility of conflicts.

Prior research has found that students' SOB in education has an impact on how well they are socially motivated (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Yet, there is a lack of clarity regarding what constitutes belonging and the role it plays in students' motivation and achievement for diverse groups. To address these issues, an attempt was made in order to get an accurate understanding of SOB and its indicators in Al-Quds University as perceived by the students. This is done using a more sociological and educational approaches. The university has about 12,000 males and females students studying different specializations at different study levels. Therefore, these students face several problems in different areas as a result of the nature of university life on one hand and the public life in the Palestinian occupied society on the other hand.

The overall purpose of the present study is to investigate the extent to which students felt they belonged to the university and the interrelation between SOB and students' academic achievement. It is considered to be the first of its kind based on the author's knowledge that addressed the complex interaction between students' SOB and educational outcomes in higher education in the Palestinian occupied society.

### **Definition of Terms**

**SOB:** Sense of belonging is the sense of psychological membership in the school, university or classroom; that is, it is the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the university environment (Alawadhi et al., 2011).

**SOC:** Sense of community is the feelings of membership and belongingness and shared socio-emotional ties (Unger & Wandesman, 1985: 155).

**Academic Achievement:** Academic achievement is success; outcome of education; and traditionally, the grade point average (GPA) (Astin, 1993). Participants were asked to self-report their GPA during 2015/2016 second semester.

### **HYPOTHESES**

Based on the reviewed literature, the set objectives, questions and variables of the study, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Taking into consideration the set objectives, the researchers developed two main hypotheses:

1. There are no statistical significant differences at  $\alpha \leq 0.05$  in the SOB of Al-Quds University students according to gender, place of residency, college, and academic year.
2. There are no statistical significant correlation at  $\alpha \leq 0.05$  between the SOB and academic achievement of Al-Quds University students.

Delimiting variables to the scope of the study based on participants' demographic characteristic include academic achievement, gender, place of residency, college, and academic year, in addition to the SOB index.

### **METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN**

The current study used a quantitative approach using a questionnaire which is appropriate to the exploratory nature of the research. The population of the present study was limited to undergraduate students of Al-Quds University, main campus, Jerusalem, Abu Dies, during 2015/2016 academic year.

The overall sample composed of three hundred and sixty-nine students (173 males and 196 females) full-time undergraduate students at Al-Quds University stratifiedly selected based on gender and academic year. The sample size was calculated using the sampling web. of <http://www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm>, sample size calculator, with a margin error of 0.05. The target population consists of Al-Quds university students in the main campus-Abu Dies during the 2015/2016 academic year, which includes nine thousand four hundred and sixty-four students (4421 males to 5043 females) (Al-Quds University, 2015).

### **Instrumentation**

Index of a 25-item scale was used to measure SOB that was developed by the research based on the SOC model (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This model takes into consideration the cultural appropriateness in the Palestinian society. 5-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, neither, disagree, and strongly disagree) was used to measure responses. Participants were

asked to complete the questionnaire in Al-Quds University main campus-Abu Dies. The sampling survey instrument sought background information about participants which are mainly gender, place of residency, college, and academic year.

Validation of the instrument proceeded in two distinct phases. The initial phase involves a small focus group session (N=18), while the second phase involved the implementation of a pilot study (N=50) to validate the survey using exploratory factor analysis. Factor loading for all items exceeded 0.50 (0.55 to 0.80). Thus, this means that those items are suitable in measuring every item of SOB of Al-Quds University students.

The reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha and Guttman split-half coefficients to ascertain reliability and consistency of the survey. Cronbach's Alpha and Guttman split-half for the survey instrument was 0.87 and 0.81, respectively, indicating good reliability and consistency.

The demographic breakdown of the participants were as follows: academic achievement, gender, place of residency, college, and academic year. In total, three hundred and sixty-nine students and five focus groups were conducted. Respondents' GPA was between 60 and 92 points of score (M 75.65 SD 6.22). Females represented 53.1% of the participants, while the remaining 46.9% were males. Thus, they were drawn from fourteen faculties: arts represented 55.8% of the sample and the rest 44.2% represents sciences. Half (50.4%) of the participants were rural, 38.2% urban, while the remaining 11.4% were from refugee camps. Students in their senior year were the largest group in terms of university year 33.9%, while 27.4% of the participants were in their sophomore year, then junior year 21.7%, and finally freshman 17.1%.

## **DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

Data analyses were undertaken using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20. The questionnaire items were rated on a 1–5 Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neither, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree). The highest score indicates a stronger SOB to the university. Descriptive statistics gauged SOB among the sampled population. Additionally, the following statistical techniques were measured: Regression, T.test, One way analysis of variance, Tukey test, Cronbach's Alpha, Guttman Split-Half Coefficient, and Factor Analysis.

The mean score of SOB scale as reported by the sample of three hundred and sixty-nine participants was moderate (M 3.34 SD 0.58). The total score showed that almost 66.8% of the students indicated moderate level of SOB to their university. Furthermore, findings revealed that the indicators of SOB of Al-Quds University students ranked in a descending order as follows: I understand university students and enjoy being among them (M 4.12 SD 1.00); I try to behave properly in my university (M 4.01 SD 1.03); I have to be concerned of what is happening at Al-Quds University (M 3.72 SD 1.03). Besides, the students indicated that academic violence is unjustified, no matter the consequence (M 3.71 SD 1.23); they feel proud of the achievements realized by Al-Quds University (M 3.68 SD 1.07); and they give more importance to community issues (M 3.67 SD 0.96). Additionally, the students emphasized that they all like to talk about Al-Quds University achievements (M 3.64 SD 1.16); they defend the position of Al-Quds University against all who reduce its value (M 3.54 SD 1.00); they do feel concern of others in the university (M 3.44 SD 1.22); and they feel proud to be Al-Quds University student (M 3.43 SD 1.15).

Furthermore, the study explored demography breakdown over SOB of Al-Quds University students with the aim of identifying any differences. Findings show that college does not indicate any significant difference. However, it was found that gender, place of residency,

and academic year are significant variables. In relation to gender, the differences were in favor of females (M 3.41 SD 0.57) compared to (M 3.28 SD 0.58) for males: T-test value was (2.191 P=0.029). As for place of residency, the differences were in favor of refugee camp students (M 3.57 SD 0.50) compared to (M 3.28 SD 0.60) for urban participants: F-value was (4.190 P=0.016).

Furthermore, differences were found in students academic year level in favor of senior students (M 3.46 SD 0.52) compared to (M 3.09 SD 0.64) for freshman participants: F-value was (5.993 P=0.001). Finally, findings indicated that there are statistical significant positive correlation between the average score of SOB of Al-Quds University students and their academic achievement: Beta-value was (0.275 P=0.000).

## **DISCUSSION**

Findings of the study showed that the students of Al-Quds University indicated a moderate level of SOB to their university. Undoubtedly, university life is a significant stage in the formation and development of one's personality; it represents a critical turning point in the life of a student. University life differs greatly from school life. The university, as an independent educational institution, represents a rich environment which requires students to lead a different life style (Musleh & Banat, 2006). In this context, Alawadhi et al. (2011) indicated that SOB deals greatly with the surrounding environment; therefore it is necessary for educational facilities to have unique design characteristics to increase the different levels of spatial knowledge.

University environment and nature of university life at Al-Quds University, along with its systematic and unsystematic matrix, is characterized for its social interaction with others, exploration of their feelings, building of friendships, maturity stage, building of personality, ability to regulate and monitor emotions, and act as a university student in a manner that is in conformity with the culture and expectations of the Palestinian student in general and in conformity with university laws and regulations in particular. However, Al-Quds University experience under Israeli occupation was and still is the most tragic one in terms of the victims and violence it has left behind. This is as a result of acts of daily attack, closure, arresting of the students, building of the apartheid wall that devoured hundreds of dunums of Al-Quds University main campus in Abu Dies, along with the unpredictable time students spend negotiating checkpoints around the campus, are the real drama of Palestinian life that was little reported in the West (Banat, 2010; Najib et al., 2015). However, the lack of security and personal safety could all contribute to the moderate scores of SOB of Al-Quds University students.

Findings revealed that the female students had a higher SOB than male students. Although patriarchal ideology is deeply rooted in the Palestinian society, where the notions of father and brother are prevalent, however, the unavailability of male students on campus; the fewer number of curriculum activities females have than males, along with their adhering to the rules, directions of the university instructions; and the fact that most females live inside the university campus which gives them the chance to stay in touch with their peers, faculty members and advisors has increased their SOB to Al-Quds University (Banat, 2015). Besides, significant results were found for gender on student's responsibility, as females' rates higher than males in taking responsibility for their academic success. Results suggested that females take more responsibility for their academic success throughout an academic semester (Adena et al., 2013).

Furthermore, results indicated that refugees' students scored a higher level of SOB to Al-Quds University. Education is highly valued among Palestinian refugees as it provides them with full awareness of the Nakba (Catastrophe, 1948) and a more powerful enemy. Also, it is perceived as both unjust and oppressive which is retained in their collective memory. Those refugees consider education as their only weapon by which they seek to develop their potentials, interact with others to advocate their just cause, and defend it locally (University) and internationally (Banat & Rimawi, 2014). Additionally, in the wake of the catastrophe, Palestinians resorted to education and knowledge as a means of surviving the loss of their lands. For refugees, education not only plays an important role in the way they perceive themselves in exile, but they also serves as a tactic of resistance against forced expulsion and uprooting (Saloul, 2009). It follows that refugees' students would likely experience a higher level of SOB to Al-Quds University.

Moreover, findings showed that senior students report a more SOB to Al-Quds University. In fact, SOB is essentially related with familiarity to an environment. According to Alawadhi et al. (2011), familiarity is considered as one of the key psychological processes that link people with an environment together. Besides, it has been found that familiarity affects wayfinding tasks in an environment (Holscher, et al., 2006). Here, we are talking about senior students who spend most of their time at the university during their undergraduate study; concerned of what is happening at Al-Quds University; give more importance to community issues; feel concern of others in the university; responsible; and joined both voluntary work and extracurricular activities managed in the university. Consequently, the more an environment is familiar to the user, the more the SOB increases.

The study results also revealed that college does not indicate any significant difference in SOB to Al-Quds University. This indicates that SOB is not very much influenced by this variable and is more likely to be affected by other factors other than college.

Finally, a positive relationship was found between students' level of SOB and their academic achievement. This indicates that SOB is a good predictor of the level of student's performance. This relationship could be linked to the fact that SOB affects the level of motivation and learning strategies, and eventually the academic progress of students at the university. There is a growing consensus that academic motivation is not a purely individual, intrapsychic state; rather, it grows out of a complex web of social and personal relationships (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). According to Collier & Morgan (2008), student's success is a significant factor in employment outcomes, earnings, and increased social status. The findings of this study are similar to some findings in the related studies and disagreed with others as well.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

SOB is a human need related to the interaction process with the surrounding environment. Sociologically, humans are sociable by nature and live within groups. Ever since the existence of man on Earth, he moved towards living in social groups. An individual cannot survive and exist for his livelihood without a society. Therefore, he should be in constant contact with others sharing their lives and everyday activities. By doing so, he can fulfill his different needs within the laid out values, customs, and traditions by the group. Thus, he would be sociably acceptable. In light of this, we realize the big role of the group and the surrounding social environment in shaping the personality and social behavior of the individual living in them (Banat, 2014B).

According to Mohamad (2006), a strong SOB in the society brings a lot of positive impact towards the individuals and the society itself. People who possess that feeling would feel that



they are a part of the society that they are living in. They are willing to put aside their differences for the sake of the society. Additionally, Capps (2003) argued that providing students with a SOB is becoming increasingly critical for schools as well as the rest of the society.

University education differs from the disciplinary and conventional approach of education at schools in general; it is different in terms of the nature of study and specializations which fulfill youth aspirations, meet their abilities, preferences, and interests. It also fulfills social interaction that contributes to the development of the students' personality, reinforces their self abilities in learning and thinking, making decisions, and holding responsibility (Banat & Rimawi, 2014). Al-Quds University performs its role as a social institution on top of the educational system in the fields of knowledge acquisition and in the preparation process of elite students. Here, a learning environment provides multiple opportunities for engagement and participation most suitable to the student's needs. This will enable them overcome all problems they face and would lead to the increase of SOB among students to their university which will foster better academic outcomes. Findings of the current study are significant for future sociological and educational studies and practice as well. Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Organize extracurricular activities between staff and students to increase their SOB towards Al-Quds University.
2. A bridging orientation week of university learning environment and networks for the freshman students was recommended.
3. A comparative study of SOB between other Palestinian universities should be stimulated.
4. Conducting an in-depth study on campus safety is needed toward the improving of SOB among Al-Quds University students.
5. A longitudinal study could be conducted to explore students SOB growth during their undergraduate studies.

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