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Discrimination History, Backlash Fear, and Ethnic Identity Among Arab Americans: Post-9/11 Snapshots

Sylvia C. Nassar-McMillan, Richard G. Lambert,
and Julie Hakim-Larson

The authors examined discrimination history, backlash fear, and ethnic identity of Arab Americans nationally at 3 times, beginning shortly after September 11, 2001. Relations between variables were moderate, and discrimination history and backlash fear were statistically significant predictors of ethnic identity. Implications for acculturation and ethnic identity are discussed.

Los autores examinaron la historia de la discriminación, el miedo a las reacciones violentas, y la identidad étnica de individuos Americanos de origen Árabe a nivel nacional en 3 momentos distintos, comenzando poco tiempo después del 11 de Septiembre de 2001. Las relaciones entre las variables fueron moderadas, y la historia de la discriminación y el miedo a las reacciones violentas pronosticaron con una fiabilidad estadísticamente significativa el nivel de identidad étnica. Se discuten las implicaciones para la aculturación y la identidad étnica.

Acculturation characterizes a shift from country of origin to the new host country in terms of values, beliefs, and attitudes (Berry, 1980) and is among the most salient issues for immigrants as well as for later generations (e.g., Kandel & Massey, 2002; Kuo & Roysircar, 2004). It denotes an affiliation with the new culture while forgoing or integrating the past into the new value structure.

Acculturation strategies may be linked to immigration waves (Abudabbeh, 1996; Ammar, 2000). Thus, counselors must be particularly attuned to the client's immigration wave cohort when assessing psychosocial histories. For example, earliest U.S. Arab immigrants were predominantly Christian, uneducated, and poor, immigrating largely for economic reasons, whereas later waves included more Muslims, those of higher educational levels, and wartime refugees (e.g., Abudabbeh, 1996). First-wave Arab immigrants assimilated quickly, whereas second-wave families remained committed to ancestral roots and less to U.S. lifestyle and values. A third wave sought professional goals while maintaining homeland cultures; a more recent group of refugees who have fled religious or political persecution have tended to uphold ethnic traditions and values (Hakim-Larson & Nassar-McMillan, 2008;

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Nassar-McMillan, 2011). It is important to note that although the later waves comprised predominantly Muslims, the majority of individuals in the United States self-defining as Arab American are non-Muslim, and many of these Arab Americans represent second and third generations in the United States. The few studies that have examined acculturation within the Arab American community prior to September 11, 2001 (9/11) identified a number of salient variables for Arab Americans (e.g., [Nassar-McMillan & Hakim-Larson, 2003](#); [Paine, 1986](#)), including discrimination, country of origin, religion, reason for immigration, gender, language (see also [Stockton, 1994](#)), and racial-religious-ethnic identification (see also [Jackson & Nassar-McMillan, 2006](#)). Studies on other ethnic groups have yielded additional variables such as length of stay and residency status in United States ([Sodowsky & Plake, 1992](#)), generation level, and nationality of origin ([Sodowsky, Lai, & Plake, 1991](#)).

immigration and ethnic identity

The construct of ethnic identity may be characterized as strong identification and pride with the country of origin rather than with the new host culture (e.g., [Phinney, 1996](#)). A consistent definition is elusive because of racial mixing, birthplace, language, culture, and religion ([Trimble & Dickson, 2005](#)). Although independent, the constructs of acculturation and ethnic identity both represent ways of reconciling values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors associated with contrasting cultures.

Arab American history is embedded within a troubled relationship between Arab and Western societies that encompasses cultural-religious gaps, military conflicts, anti-U.S. portrayals of Islam and Arabs ([Barry, Elliott, & Evans, 2000](#)), and terrorist acts of Arab extremists against the United States. These dynamics have resulted in heightened acts of profiling and discrimination against Arabs in the United States. Such experiences may affect political ideologies and civic involvement: some become active in social justice initiatives, others may become embittered and further disenfranchised ([Nassar-McMillan, 2003](#)), while still others may vacillate due to situational criteria ([Sarroub, 2002](#)).

Few studies have examined the sociological context of Arab American ethnic identity ([Barry et al., 2000](#); [Read, 2003](#)). Preliminary findings of an Arab American Institute (2002b) survey of Arab Americans' views on ethnic profiling and pride after 9/11 yielded 30% reporting past discrimination, 31% workplace discrimination, 78% increased profiling since 9/11, and 40% the impact of 9/11 on willingness to self-disclose one's Arab ethnicity. Other research findings are similar. Violence, discrimination, and defamation against Arab Americans have reached unprecedented proportions ([Abdelkarim, 2002](#); [Cainkar, 2002](#)). Within the year following 9/11, Human Rights Watch (2002) reported a 1,700% increase in reported hate and bias crimes against Arabs and Muslims. A qualitative study on South Asian families ([Inman, Yeh, Madan-Bahel, & Nath, 2007](#))

poignantly depicts some of these events. Such experiences may increase feelings of anxiety, fear, and rejection (Ahmed & Reddy, 2007).

Our quantitative inquiry may serve to enhance understanding of the ethnic identity of Arab Americans. We examined Arab Americans' discrimination history and backlash fear to determine their relation to ethnic identity. We investigated exploratory, nondirectional hypotheses for our secondary analyses of archived data, with goals of measuring changes over time as well as relations with variables in ways that had not been previously examined.

method

The Arab American Institute contracted with Zogby International (ZI) to conduct three national telephone surveys of Arab Americans to capture the impact of the 9/11 tragedy on Arab Americans. The initial 40-item instrument was modified slightly each time to reflect emergent political issues. Using archival raw unadjusted data, we created scale scores for the predictor (i.e., backlash fear, discrimination) and outcome (i.e., ethnic identity) variables.

PARTICIPANTS

The total sample included 1,513 participants. As shown on Table 1, the sample sizes for the three waves of data collection were 508, 505, and 500, respectively. Some demographics include the following: male (64.18%), female (35.83%), Christian (52.15%), Muslim (35.97%), U.S. born (41.44%), U.S. citizens (94.98%), professional (49.37%), income (just over 40% in the \$75,000 bracket), age (mean age of 49 years), and region of United States (36% East, 28% Central, 18% South, and 18% West). Most prominent regions of origins included over 30% from Lebanon, over 20% from Palestine, approximately 12% from Syria, and just under 10% from Egypt, with the remaining origins

TABLE 1
Demographics by Survey Sample

Variable	% Sample 1 (n = 508)	% Sample 2 (n = 505)	% Sample 3 (n = 500)	% Total (N = 1,513)	χ^2	p
Professional	52.20	46.90	49.00	49.37	2.82	.244
Unemployed	2.00	0.99	0.00	0.99	9.95	.007
Male	66.70	64.20	61.60	64.18	2.89	.236
Female	33.30	35.80	38.40	35.83		
Christian	43.90	58.00	54.60	52.15	22.04	.000
Muslim	37.20	33.70	37.00	35.97	1.63	.442
Born in the U.S.	39.20	43.20	42.00	41.44	1.76	.414
U.S. citizen	95.70	94.30	95.00	94.98	1.06	.589

Note. Professional = managerial, medical, professional, technical, or teacher responses.

(28%) spanning the League of Arab States (e.g., Iraq, Jordan, Other). These demographics appear to be representative of basic demographic profiles of Arab Americans at large (Arab American Institute, n.d.).

MEASURES

Discrimination history. Four items asked about specific discrimination (“Have you personally experienced discrimination in the past because of your ethnicity?” “Since the terrorist attacks on the U.S. on 9/11, have you personally experienced discrimination because of your ethnicity?” “Have any of your children or other household members experienced discrimination since the terrorist attacks on 9/11?” and “Do you know anyone of Arabic ethnicity or with an Arabic-speaking background who has experienced discrimination since the terrorist attacks on 9/11?”). Response options were yes or no. A total score was created that indicated the percentage of the four experiences that respondents had encountered (see Table 2). Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for this scale were moderate ($\alpha = .72-.75$). Given our secondary analysis design, we considered these acceptable (Nannally & Bernstein, 1994).

Backlash fear. One single item addressed fear of backlash against Arab Americans (“How worried are you about the long-term effects of discrimination against Arab Americans?”). This item was scored using a 3-point scale from 1 = *not worried* to 3 = *very worried* (see Table 2).

Ethnic identity. Three items asked about ethnic heritage. For example, “How proud are you of your ethnic heritage?” These items were scored on a 3-point

TABLE 2
Scale Score Correlations, Descriptive Statistics, and Cronbach’s Alphas

Variable	Ethnic Identity	Backlash Fear	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Cronbach’s α
Sample 1 (<i>n</i> = 508)					
Ethnic identity ^a			2.45	0.57	.70
Backlash fear ^b	.31		2.02	0.81	
Discrimination history ^c	.28	.36	1.24	1.33	.72
Sample 2 (<i>n</i> = 505)					
Ethnic identity ^a			2.51	0.53	.68
Backlash fear ^b	.32		2.00	0.82	
Discrimination history ^c	.22	.39	1.23	1.36	.74
Sample 3 (<i>n</i> = 500)					
Ethnic identity ^a			2.50	0.51	.62
Backlash fear ^b	.29		2.09	0.83	
Discrimination history ^c	.21	.40	1.28	1.39	.75

Note. All correlation coefficients greater than .15 are statistically significant at the .001 level given *n* = 500.

^aValues represent the means across the items on a 3-point scale. ^bValues represent the mean of a single item on a 3-point scale; thus, Cronbach’s alpha is not applicable. ^cValues represent the average number of experiences reported by the respondents.

scale from 1 = *not important* to 3 = *very important*, with a mean response resulting in a scale score (see Table 2). Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the scores were moderately low ($\alpha = .62-.70$). Given that the ethnic identity scale contains only three items and alpha is a function of scale length, we interpreted these coefficients as acceptable (Nannally & Bernstein, 1994).

PROCEDURE

ZI conducted the surveys in October 2001 (Sample 1), May 2002 (Sample 2), and October 2002 (Sample 3). Phone numbers were randomly selected from a preexisting national surname directory compiled on Arab surnames by ZI. This directory is utilized by ZI to conduct polls on Arab Americans issues and is updated periodically through exhaustive national reviews of residential and commercial telephone directories and other resources. The Arab American Institute released the archival data sets and instruments to the first author for secondary analyses. Each sample represents an independent group of respondents. Significant sample differences were found for religion and employment status. Sample 1 included a smaller percentage of Christians than Samples 2 and 3, and Sample 3 included no unemployed individuals.

Hierarchical regression is commonly used to initially control for the association between demographic covariates and the dependent variable. Predictor variables are subsequently added to such models to test for their association with the dependent variable in the context of first having accounted for the variance that can be attributed to the control variables (Tabachnik & Fidell, 2007). Given the differences in demographics between the samples, three hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted using citizenship, country of origin, religion, socioeconomic and professional status, and gender as control variables. Discrimination history and backlash fear were added in the second step as predictor variables, and ethnic identity served as the dependent variable.

results

To address changes over time, we compared discrimination history, backlash fear, and ethnic identity scores across the three samples (see Table 2), yielding no statistically significant differences. The mean score for ethnic identity was 2.5, between somewhat important and very important. For discrimination history, mean percentages remained consistent across samples at approximately 30%. On average, respondents across the three samples reported having one or two of the four discrimination experiences. For backlash fear, mean scores remained consistent across samples at approximately 2, or somewhat worried, with no statistically significant differences. Table 2 also contains the correlations between the predictor variables and between the predictor variables and the dependent variable. Discrimination history and backlash fear were

moderately correlated in all three samples ($r = .36-.40$) but not so highly that multicollinearity would be a concern.

To examine the prediction of ethnic identity from discrimination history and backlash fear, we computed hierarchical regressions for each of the three samples. First, we entered all demographic variables as a block; next, we entered backlash fear and discrimination history as a block while controlling for demographic variables. In the first step in each of the three samples, three of the control variables (U.S.-born, male, and Christian religion) accounted for statistically significant amounts of variance in ethnic identity. Each of these beta weights was negative, indicating that those born in the United States, males, and Christians all have relatively lower ethnic identity. Step 1 R^2 values across the three samples, respectively, were as follows: Sample 1: .06, $F(6, 501) = 5.54, p < .001$; Sample 2: .14, $F(6, 498) = 12.91, p < .001$; and Sample 3: .10, $F(6, 493) = 9.03, p < .001$ (see Table 3). In Step 2, Christian religion was no longer a statistically significant predictor, whereas being male and born in the United States remained statistically significant (in the negative direction) associated with ethnic identity for all three samples.

For Sample 1, backlash fear and discrimination history significantly accounted for variance in ethnic identity each in the second step and accounted for additional variance in ethnic identity beyond that of the demographic variables. Discrimination history was not a significant contributor for Sample 2. The full

TABLE 3
Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Ethnic Identity

Step and Variable	Sample 1 (n = 508)			Sample 2 (n = 505)			Sample 3 (n = 500)		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Step 1									
Professional	.01	.05	.01	-.01	.05	-.01	.01	.05	.01
Male	-.15**	.05	-.12**	-.17***	.05	-.15***	-.17***	.05	-.16***
High SES	.08	.06	.07	.01	.05	.01	.02	.05	.02
Christian	-.12*	.05	-.10*	-.15**	.05	-.14**	-.11*	.05	-.11*
Born in the U.S.	-.20***	.05	-.17***	-.30***	.05	-.28***	-.22***	.05	-.21***
U.S. citizen	.10	.12	.04	.10	.10	.04	.05	.10	.02
Step 2									
Professional	-.02	.05	-.02	-.03	.05	-.03	.00	.05	.00
Male	-.13**	.05	-.11**	-.13**	.05	-.12**	-.14***	.05	-.14***
High SES	.05	.05	.04	.00	.05	.00	.03	.05	.03
Christian	-.05	.05	-.05	-.06	.05	-.06	-.04	.05	-.04
Born in the U.S.	-.16**	.05	-.14**	-.28**	.05	-.26***	-.21***	.05	-.20***
U.S. citizen	.02	.12	.01	.11	.05	.05	.05	.05	.02
Backlash fear	.15***	.03	.21***	.14***	.05	.22***	.11***	.05	.18***
Discrimination history	.00***	.00	.19***	.00	.05	.09	.00**	.00	.13**

Note. $R^2 = .06, .14, \text{ and } .10$ for Step 1 in Samples 1, 2, and 3, respectively. $\Delta R^2 = .10, .06, \text{ and } .06$ for Step 2 in Samples 1, 2, and 3, respectively. All R^2 and ΔR^2 values are statistically significant ($p < .001$). High SES = high socioeconomic status.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

model R^2 values across the three samples, respectively, were as follows: Sample 1: .16, $F(8, 499) = 11.87$, $p < .001$; Sample 2: .20, $F(8, 496) = 15.16$, $p < .001$; and Sample 3: .16, $F(8, 491) = 11.44$, $p < .001$. The R^2 change statistics (.10, .06, and .06, respectively) were significant for all three samples.

discussion

The findings of the present study support previous research outcomes on Arab Americans and ethnic identity (Arab American Institute, 2002b; Nassar-McMillan, 2003; Nassar-McMillan & Hakim-Larson, 2003). On average, participants had at least one or two discriminatory experiences. The consistent score across samples suggests that many reported some discrimination after 9/11 and that this pattern did not diminish with time, although we do not know how these compare with pre-9/11 numbers. In terms of backlash fear, the mean scores represent a *somewhat worried* stance, consistent across administrations. Finally, participants ranked their ethnic identity as ranging between important and somewhat important. Ethnic identity is reported by other scholars to have increased in the recent, post-9/11 past (Arab American Institute, 2002a, 2002b). Thus, our study provides some insight into discrimination, backlash fear, and ethnic identity within this community.

The finding of differences between Christians and Muslims in the present study is consistent with previous works highlighting the relative ease of Christians toward acculturation and the perceived discrimination of Muslims, even prior to 9/11 (e.g., Jackson & Nassar-McMillan, 2006; Sadowsky et al., 1991; Sadowsky & Plake, 1992). Likewise, U.S.-born participants, presumably more acculturated, had lower levels of ethnic identity, consistent with those of other U.S. ethnic minority groups (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1989) as well as previous research suggesting that foreign-born Muslims may perceive more prejudice and be less acculturated than some other foreign-born religious and nationality groups (Kuo, Roysircar, & Newby-Clark, 2006).

The current milieu, replete with profiling and prejudice, poses challenges to Arab Americans of any age. In Sample 1, just in the wake of 9/11, discrimination history emerged as a moderate predictor of ethnic identity. Although discrimination history was not significant in Sample 2, it emerged again as significant in Sample 3. Thus, discrimination levels remained relatively similar, but their impact may have diminished and then may have been retriggered by new sociopolitical issues such as the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Backlash fear remained a moderately strong predictor of ethnic identity across all three samples. The meaning of participants' fear such as fear of deportation or other repatriation may have emerged from discrimination experiences.

implications for counseling

It is important to note that our study examined perceived rather than actual discrimination. At the same time, counseling issues may emerge from perceptions, particularly in cases of oppression and discrimination. Counselors need to be at-

tuned to the impact of political climate on their clients. In particular, they need to be aware that foreign-born and American Muslims, like other minority groups, may perceive themselves as subject to oppression, contributing to their acculturative stress. In providing empathic support to Arab Americans, counselors need to address this issue at multiple levels, such as by promoting empowerment and resiliency in family and community systems (Hakim-Larson & Nassar-McMillan, 2008; [Nassar-McMillan, Gonzalez, & Mohamed, 2008](#); Nassar-McMillan & Hakim-Larson, 2003), sociopolitical advocacy (Nassar-McMillan, 2003, 2007), and outreach initiatives (Nassar-McMillan, 2007). Moreover, counselors need to be aware that some immigrants may seek out indigenous rather than “professional” helpers ([Inman et al., 2007](#)). In any case, treatment plans, assessments, and other counseling services need to be culture sensitive ([Ahmed & Reddy, 2007](#); [Inman et al., 2007](#)).

Backlash fear and discrimination are not surprising among newer Muslim immigrants, such as Somalis. Although advocacy efforts among counselors should target policy and sociopolitical change, counselors need to be aware of current law and practice around profiling and discrimination so that they can also directly empower their clients by providing accurate legal information.

The discussion now moves to the participants’ demographics. In terms of gender representation, it is not clear how the overrepresentation of males in the sample may have had an impact on the results. The findings regarding gender differences need to be taken with caution, as the sample may not have been representative of Arab women in the population. The outcomes of our exploratory study, in this regard, warrant further research before conclusions can be drawn. Employment status also yielded results that warrant further examination. Although discrimination and racism may be inversely correlated with employment status among other minority populations, particularly those with economic disadvantages, professional status was not related to discrimination or ethnic identity. In the present study, the sample yielded relatively high levels of professional employment.

Finally, counselors might facilitate ethnic identity and pride within their Arab American clients, especially those more acculturated and those who experience discrimination. Helping clients find ways to connect with their culture of origin, through community, cultural, or advocacy initiatives, for example, can help build clients’ cultural self-awareness, ethnic pride, and resilience.

limitations

The relatively large sample sizes in all three samples allowed small correlations between the predictor variables and the outcome to become statistically significant. Although the standardized beta weights for these effects were small (.13–.22; [Cohen, 1988](#)), they did remain stable across the three samples. That is, if perceived discrimination and fear of 9/11 backlash, relative to ethnic identity, occurred as a psychological response to 9/11 in two samples, it did not diminish with time. However, we did not have access to data that could be used to compare this outcome with pre-9/11 results. Another limitation is

that only a small subset of items was common to all three surveys, and these items were not designed to be combined into scale scores. Thus, studies using theoretically based test items are needed to refine and classify subgroups of Arab Americans and their attitudes. Trimble and Dickson (2005) cautioned against “ethnic glossing”—an illusion of ethnic homogeneity masking actual unique and rich subgroup differences, which are important for counselors to take into account in their work with Arab American clients.

Our study provides an avenue for counselors to recognize the impact of multicultural competence in working with Arab Americans by learning about their discrimination histories and backlash fear. It also illuminates the need for further research on the identity development of Arab Americans, as well as culturally sensitive clinical practices that take into account some of the factors we examined and the ways in which these may interact to influence ethnic identity development in Arab Americans.

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