

Who Am I? Ethnic Identity Formation of Arab Muslim Children in Contemporary U.S. Society

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Identity formation is a lifelong developmental process. It is multidimensional, consisting of diverse aspects such as sex, occupation, education, cultural background, family structure, and race and ultimately emerges from an interaction between the self and the context.^{1,2} Ethnic identity formation, a process of developing an understanding of one's origins with respect to a particular reference group, begins in childhood^{3,4} and often consolidates in adolescence.² Ethnic identity is a central aspect of social development for most non-European immigrants^{5,6} and has been linked to psychological adjustment and the overall well-being of immigrant children and adolescents.⁷ The ecological context (i.e., the local social, political, and cultural environments) is a key influence on ethnic identity,⁸ and discord among these environments may be a conflictual milieu for the formation of ethnic identity.

Growing up Muslim and Arab in the United States in this post–September 11, 2001 era is complex, not just with respect to the different aspects of identity,⁹ but also

because of the current political and social context, which tends to promote wariness toward Arab Muslims in the Western world.¹⁰ Based on an analysis of the interaction between the ecological context and the development of identity, it has been hypothesized that the psychological well-being of Arab Muslim children and adolescents is potentially at risk.¹¹ As Arab Muslim children develop their ethnic identity, they are attempting to make sense of their own place within these already complex social constructs, but unfortunately we lack a comprehensive body of knowledge and a sufficient understanding of the processes and issues that these children face during the course of identity formation.

The aim of this article is to introduce the nascent, albeit fascinating, body of multidisciplinary research examining issues linked with ethnic identity development of Arab Muslim children and to recommend areas of research to address the existing gaps, with the goal of understanding and promoting the healthy development of the next generation of Arab Muslim children growing up in the United States. By way of introduction, the first section of the article provides a brief historical overview of Arab Muslim immigration to the United States, but does not include a discussion of the role of Islam in other cultures, such as the African American or other Asian immigrant cultures. There may be areas of overlap as well as substantial areas of difference.

WHO ARE THE ARAB MUSLIM IMMIGRANTS?

The word *Arab* usually connotes people who are either from one of the 22 Arab States spanning from north Africa to the Middle East (Algeria, Bahrain, Comoro Islands, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen) or whose

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ancestors come from this region, even though not everybody who comes from these countries is necessarily an Arab. It often entails having Arabic as a first or familial language. Muslims are followers of Islam, irrespective of ethnicity, sect, or language. The terms *Arab* and *Muslim* are often used synonymously to indicate an inextricable association between religion and ethnicity,^{12,13} but the terms are not synonymous, even if these distinctions are sometimes blurred.

The immigration pattern of Arabs (Muslim and Christians) to the United States has generally been divided into three waves: pre–World War II, post–World War II (after the 1960s), and the most recent influx of refugees.^{14,15} The pre–World War II Arab immigrants, who began to arrive in the late 1800s, were mainly farmers and laborers who came to the United States to fill labor demands. Post–World War II Arab immigrants tended to be educated, bilingual professionals.¹⁶ Recent immigrants have tended to be refugees, coming as victims of political conflict in the Arab region.¹⁷

Thus, similar to many other groups that have immigrated to the United States, Arabs may have a common history, but it is one that involves different paths to the United States at different points in time, and Arabs are themselves a heterogeneous group. The 2000 U.S. Census estimates that there are approximately 1.2 million Americans of Arab descent living in the United States.¹⁸ Census data also suggest that Arab immigrants tend to be fluent in English, on average hold a college or higher education degree, and are professionally employed, typically earning a higher median income than other families residing in the United States.¹⁸ Given that the Census does not collect data on religion, this estimate is provided for all religious denominations (Muslim and Christians) who claim Arab ancestry. It should be noted that since the events of September 11, 2001, the experiences of Arab Muslims and Arab Christians have been different, thereby potentially dividing Arab Americans along religious lines.¹⁹

Islam has come to the United States in a variety of ways, including immigration from Arab nations as well as from immigrants from Africa and Asia and from conversion to the faith. It is estimated that Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in the United States and the Western world, and if immigration and conversion rates remain unchanged, Muslims will be the largest religious minority in the Western world in the 21st century.^{20,21}

RESEARCH ON ARAB MUSLIM CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

The research on Arab Muslim children and adolescents can be categorized into three broad areas: research on Muslims, research on Arabs (including immigrants and Arab Americans), and research on Arab Muslims. There has been some degree of overlap between these areas given that they are not mutually exclusive categories. The research on Muslim and Arab American and immigrant children and families has been culled from several disciplines (including anthropology, sociology, psychology, and history) and is based on diverse methodologies, ranging from qualitative ethnographic research to large-scale survey studies.^{19,22} Overall, interest in Arab Muslims in general, and children in particular, is a relatively new phenomenon, in part stimulated by the events of September 11, 2001, and is thus at best considered formative.

The mainstay of research on Arab Muslim children and youths has focused on the interaction between development and the child's environment. Derived from the classic ecological perspective²³ and the belief that the local context plays a powerful role in identity development,⁸ this body of research has been most informative in understanding the role of two central influences, namely, schools and peer groups. Research has particularly focused on the views of Arab Muslim children and youths and how they see themselves perceived in the post–September 11, 2001 era.

For children, one of the most important ecological contexts is their school. Since September 11, 2001, there have been increasing reports of schools becoming a milieu of discrimination, bullying, and exclusion of Arab Muslim students. Several studies have examined this. Ahmad and Szapara²⁴ showed how Muslim adolescents in New York City are reporting pervasive misperceptions and negative stereotypes about Islam in their schools. Arab American youths tend to feel isolated and separated from their peers and the surrounding academic environment and feel that this is largely due to cultural misunderstandings and discrimination.²⁵ In particular, girls who wear the hijab, or headdress, report feeling the most vulnerable,²⁶ a phenomenon the media has dubbed “hijabophobia”.²⁷

In addition to potentially strained peer group interactions, children may be faced with conflicts arising in the curricula and pedagogical practices. For instance,

recent work has indicated that the curricula students are exposed to may be biased in how information about Islam is being taught in schools.²⁸ Negative or incorrect information at school not only may register as personally problematic for youths in their school environment but also can have repercussions at home. Children may face a situation wherein there may be a substantial difference between what is generally taught in school and what is taught at home, encompassing such approaches as attitudes and expectations and affecting such powerful and contentious issues as sex roles, family structures, paternalism, and allegiances.

In an elegant ethnography on Yemeni adolescent girls in a U.S. public school, Sarroub²⁹ cogently describes some of the challenges to ethnic identity formation when contextual expectations for behavior are disparate. Sarroub found that students are encouraged in school to think independently about texts, to question what they read, and to critically analyze information presented to them. Juxtaposed against this expectation is the expectation of Islam and in Muslim homes, especially in those homes where the families have immigrated from a Muslim country (where the culture of interpreting Islam may differ from nonmajority Muslim countries), where reading and being able to recite the Quran is the epitome of knowledge and literacy. Children are being taught to challenge what they read at school, but then at home and in religious instruction they are studying the Quran in an environment where acceptance of the content is expected. Although all children may experience tensions between home and school, this is a culturally specific conflict between expectations and one that may cause personal difficulties as Muslim children become critical of the foundational text that forms the literary and religious core of family. Reconciling this dichotomy may be the basis of an ethnic identity predicament. This is precisely what Sarroub found: Girls in this study believed that they were failing at being American, Yemeni, and Muslim.²⁹

CALL FOR EXPANDING THE BODY OF RESEARCH ON ARAB MUSLIM CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

For Arab Muslim children and adolescents, ethnic identity formation is already challenging due to the inherent complexities of being a minority, but all the more so when the culture and the political milieu may not be supportive of positive ethnic identity develop-

ment.¹¹ This discordance between self and context potentially puts children at risk of poorer mental health outcomes, but also serves as a call to scholars to expand this fascinating area of research. Research is required to develop a conceptual framework that captures the complexity of what young Arab Muslims are experiencing as they develop selfhood and identity and to understand how a particular set of interactions between one's self and the context influences the development of identity and the psychological well-being of Arab Muslim children.

Toward a Better Conceptual Understanding

Current conceptual models of ethnic identity are based on criteria that were not developed specifically for Arab Muslims and therefore potentially fall short in making sense of what it means to be an Arab and Muslim child or adolescent. Much of the excellent research on Arab Muslim children is in disparate areas that lack the cohesive conceptual framework that would fully explicate ethnic identity of Arab Muslim children.²² A rationale for pursuing a more appropriate and comprehensive model to understand ethnic identity development is justified with a brief summary of the current prominent models of ethnic identity and areas in which they fall short in explaining an Arab Muslim identity.

Original models of ethnic identity focused on first-generation "white ethnics" (e.g., Italians, Irish) who immigrated to the United States in the 1920s and largely assimilated into mainstream American culture. For second- and third-generations of these immigrants, ethnic identity is often linked to familial identity and local affiliations but, most important, may be optional, given the relative possibilities of assimilation into the dominant cultures.^{30,31} Faced with unique conflicts, often with clear markers of difference that do not allow the identity to become optional, and with different avenues toward assimilation and barricades against assimilation, these models of ethnicity have not been effectively adapted to Arab Muslims. For example, on a daily basis, recent "white ethnics" are less likely to face skepticism from the general population, compared to Arab Muslim immigrants, who are constantly made aware of their "foreignness" (e.g., traditional clothing, even stereotypical features) and individual ethnic and religious identity compared to the general population.¹⁹

A second set of ethnic identity models focusing on more recent immigrants of color (e.g., from Africa, Latin

America, and the Caribbean)³² have also not provided a useful model. In this case, skin color is the primary dimension around which ethnicity is defined.^{33,34} These models, which have tended to focus on the African Diaspora and Latin American immigration, have not appeared useful in understanding ethnic identity for Arab Muslim children and youths. In part, this is because Arabs have had such a substantially different history and are not technically immigrants of color because they are categorized as “white” on the Census tract. Also, skin color has not been the major or central determinant of either Arabic ethnicity or the Islamic religion. Although the aforementioned theories do not provide models for a specific understanding of Arab Muslim identity in an American context, they do provide some perspective on the Arab Muslim experience as a general minority experience in the United States.

A third set of models classify ethnic identity more broadly into four generic categories: national identity (e.g., Mexican, Egyptian), American national identity; hyphenate American identity (e.g., Mexican American, Egyptian American), and panethnic identity.^{32,35} The former two categories do not apply to most Arab Muslim youths, based as they are on national entities that do not specifically apply to the categories of Arab or Muslim⁹; the latter two do hold limited relevance. A hyphenate American identity, Arab-American, is used frequently to refer to Arabic-speaking individuals residing in the United States.³⁶ The term was introduced in the late 1960s as a result of various global political events and serves to unite both immigrants and U.S.-born Arabs under a common heritage and shared history. This bicultural identity should not be understood as a midpoint between ethnic and American identity, but rather results from identification with two cultures, American and Arab.^{5,37} As such, it is a reminder that as Arab Muslim youths in the United States develop their identities, the “American” part cannot be ignored. Finally, the panethnic identity—Arab—provides only a partial indicator of ethnic identity for Arab Muslims because it excludes that other central identity, namely, religion. In Arab culture, religious affiliation defines expectations for behavior and is a strong influence on the conceptualization of ethnic identity.³⁷ Therefore, a panethnic identity may indicate national heritages, but it excludes those powerful religious influences in an Arab Muslim identity.

The multiple dimensions of an Arab Muslim identity include an ethnic Arab dimension that has strong cultural, historical, and social components, a religious component with which it is inextricably linked, and gender issues as alluded to above.⁹ For example, even though Arab and Muslim are not synonymous, the boundaries between the two can be blurred, from within as well as from without. In one study, when asked to separate behavioral expectations of culture from religion, Arab Muslim high school–age adolescents conflated the two, expressing a blurred demarcation between culture and religion (Britto and el-Annan, manuscript in preparation). Gender identity is also key to being an Arab Muslim, both influenced by and influencing how Arab and Muslim are understood. These issues around gender are not independent of religion or culture. For example, the hijab is a potent symbol at the intersection of the female body, culture, and religion.²⁷ Or, as another example, behavioral expectations for Arab Muslim boys are significantly different compared to those for Arab Muslim girls.²⁹

Thus, three predominant ways of conceptualizing the intersection of identities in American life have less to offer young Arab Muslims in America than they might other groups. Given the complex interplay between the dimensions of religion, sex, and ethnicity within an Arab Muslim identity, there is a need for conceptual models that can consolidate these interactions. Furthermore, it could be argued that the groupings of Arab and Muslim are too broad and contain distinct constructs that would need to be revealed for a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of ethnic identity for these children. It is crucially important to recognize this inherent complexity as children and youths navigate their identity formation, just as it has been important to consider the unique cultural factors that affect other children. This is all the more important in the current American climate, where identity formation for Arab Muslim youths is being influenced at multiple levels by a vibrant but conflict-laden ecological context, which at times is nonsupportive and discordant with the process of identity development. One of the key challenges facing us is to understand how this ecological context affects children at different developmental stages and the way this in turn alters, promotes, or introduces conflict into ethnic identity formation across a life span.

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