

Dynamics to Buffer Discrimination and Its Psychological Effects among Arab Americans: Religiousness, Family Affinity, and Ethnic Affiliation

Billel FILALI, Université de Frère Mentouri Constantine 1, Algérie

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Abstract

The research purports to analyze discrimination, its effects, and the way it impacted the Arab Americans. Through a brief historical survey of the Arabs' immigration to America, the research seeks to emphasize that ethnic and religious discrimination against Arab Americans is as old as the early arrival of the first Arab wave. Unquestionably, the ethnic and religious discrimination against Arab Americans results in stress, malaise, and other psychological discomforts.

This research spots the light on certain elements that had been deeply examined and, consequently, considered by ethnic studies researches as negative aspects that aggravate the existing stereotypes of the Arab Americans' status. Contrary to that, this research investigates the ways in which family affinity, religiousness, and racial affiliation can be turned reversibly into positive factors that help Arab Americans to mitigate discrimination and, consequently, its serious psychological effects.

Keywords: Arab Americans, Discrimination, Psychological Status, Religiousness, Family Affinity, Ethnic Affiliation

Introduction:

Arab Americans are Americans of Arab origins whose ancestry can be traced back to one of the Arab nations in the different parts of the world (the African and Asian continents). The overwhelming majority of those Arab Americans descend from 05 out of 22 Arab nations; Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, and Iraq.

Historically, Arabs moved to America in three different phases. (Tabbah, 2004) In fact, the dates of these phases are debatable, but most historians agree that the first wave (1870's-1920's) included Christians from nowadays Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan. (Semaan, 2007) The second wave (post WWII- 1960's) contained Palestinians following the declaration of the State of Israel. The third wave (1960's-2001) started from the Arab-Israeli conflict of 1967 until 9/11 events. (Semaan, 2007)

Like the majority of the ethnic minorities living in the United States, Arab Americans faced a long history of racism that started early with the Ku Klux Klan. The latter targeted Arab Americans because they were "colored, catholic, and foreign". (Saloom, 2005) Wingfield commented on the "weird" status of the Arab Americans when noting that regardless of the official categorization of Arabs as a highly educated and easily assimilated white race, they are reversely considered as culturally foreign and treated as the "other" and sometimes as an enemy. (2006)

During the beginning of the twentieth Century, and as a result of the raising questions over U.S. citizenship, many courts across the U.S. started to question the whiteness of the Levant Arabs. In 1910, the Syrians were classified by the U.S. Census Bureau as Asiatic. During the following years, a district judge from South Carolina declared Syria as a part of the Restrictive Immigration Act of 1917 framework. (Samhan, 1999)

It is noteworthy to mention that the first wave of Arab Americans benefited from different privileges such as the Naturalization Act of 1790 where the overwhelming majority was Christian. It was not until the outbreak of the Arab-Israeli conflict of 1948(the second wave) that Arab Americans began to witness different challenges that threatened their whiteness, faith, and status. The nature of new Arab immigrants, mostly Muslim refugees, students, exiles, political dissidents, intensified the emergence of racial revisions that resulted in conferring and denying of citizenship. (Gana, 2008)

Following 9/11 events, discrimination against Arab Americans took new shapes and different dimensions. While many researchers depicted them as a marginalized and misunderstood ethnic minority in the U.S., others were keen to associate them to violence, anti-Americanism, and terrorism (Awad, 2010) The results of these accusations were verbal and physical harassment, allegations of crimes and aggressions, and the responsibility of everything related to violence, hostility, and horror. (Derous et al., 2009)

contrary to many researches that were conducted over the way ethnic and religious origins can negatively affect the psychological status of the Arab Americans, this research paper

argues that certain racial and religious elements such as religiousness, family affinity, and ethnic affiliation can play a positive role in minimizing the effects of discrimination and consequently results in a positive psychological wellbeing

1. **Discrimination against the Arab Americans: Religious and Ethnic Dimensions**
2. **Religious Concerns:**

As a matter of fact, discrimination against Arab Americans following 9/11 is conspicuous. Remarkably, Muslim Arab Americans are vulnerable to more and high levels of religious discrimination if compared to Christian and non-religious Arab Americans. (Moradi & Hasan, 2004) One should note that the very possible interpretation of the convulsing levels of discrimination against Muslim Arab Americans is the detectable and visible signs of Islam such as *Hijab*, beard, and the spot of praying on the forehead. Correspondingly, Asian Sikhs suffered from harassment and discrimination as a result of misrecognition in appearance with Muslims. (Ahluwalia & Pelletiere, 2010) Many researchers concluded that Muslim Arab Americans who are more religious are classified as a threat and more dangerous than the non-religious ones. (Ikizter & Szymanski, 2008)

2. **Ethnic Concerns**

The subject of the Arab American identity and its nature is puzzling. Like the majority of ethnic minorities living in the United States, Arab Americans are forming a mosaic in terms of religious orientations, political affiliations, social classes, and identity. Ethnically, Lebanese Americans are identified as more white compared to the Iraqi or Yemeni Americans. (Ajrouch & Jamal, 2007) Nevertheless, since 9/11 events, Arab Americans faced a "New Exclusion Act" throughout series of unjustified detentions, pursuing deportation orders, fingerprinting, and secret trials that were authorized by the Justice Department and executed by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) (Hassan, 2002)

Moreover, hostile media representation, denial of political rights of representation, distortion of values, and twisting the image of the Arab nations and the Islamic civilization and the intensification of the portrayals of Arab Americans as enemies of democracy and modernity were common and frequent practices that aimed at restraining immigration from the Arab nations. Structurally, racial profiling excluded Arab Americans from a wide range of social institutions (art, news, civil society, academia and public policy).

As a matter of fact, two months after 9/11 events, Arab Americans reported more than 700 violent incidents. During the following year, 800 incidents of employment discrimination and more than 80 cases of passengers removed from flights and other hate crimes targeted Arab Americans. The Center for the study of Hate and Extremism recorded a high level of

criminality against Arab Americans; hate crimes scored 219%, the highest since 9/11. (Levin & Grisham, 2016)

Its explicit aim is the protection of American citizens, the Patriot Act served as another weapon to severely limit people's rights and liberties. In fact, scholars and researchers conducted many studies over Arab Americans and how they were directly affected by the act, its execution, dimensions, and impact. Commenting on a text from the Domestic Security Enhancement Act, (which is deemed to be an extension to the original Act, or the Second Patriot Act) Bill Moyers stated that the Act would further permit federal agents and intelligent officials to disrupt people's privacy and launch series of arrests without justified reasons but simply because of suspicion. (Cole, 2003) This legislation included all Americans, be they visitors, temporary and permanent residents, and even citizens.

1. Psychological Malaise: A Chain Reaction

Undoubtedly, religious and ethnic discrimination against Arab Americans produces and prompts a deteriorating mental and psychological health and poor well being. Different studies that were conducted over the subject of discrimination against Arab Americans following 9/11 showed a larger effect size than any other ethnic minority in the U.S. including Black and Latin Americans. (Schmitt et al., 2014) Psychological difficulties that Muslim Arab Americans suffered from in 2007 were not noticeable among non-Muslim Arab Americans during the same year. (Rosseau et al., 2011) Moreover, a survey conducted by Padela and Heisler concluded that ethnic and religious discrimination against Arab Americans from Detroit resulted in more psychological pressures, decreasing levels of happiness, and declining health conditions. (2010)

Post 9/11 environment in the United States created prominent paranoia and phobia for the Arab Americans. This status played a conceptual role in keeping Arab Americans out of the political scene and helped in invoking fear of being harassed and arrested. Subsequently, subjects such as the Arab-Israeli conflict and the American are no more existent as a consequence of being molested or accused of being anti Semite, and worse, anti American. (Salaita, 2006)

Anguish, anxiety, and distress among Arab Americans were fueled by many articles and newspapers' columns that carried hostile sentiments. During his intervention in one of the televised shows, North Carolina's Congressman Howard Coble stated publicly that some Arab Americans are intending to harm "us". (Salaita, 2006) In fact, the use of "us" in this context has a specific connotation. It gives one the impression that many Americans, including politicians, intellectuals, and public personalities are considering Arab Americans an ethnic group that is separate from the U.S. society.

It is noteworthy to shed light on certain elements that had been deeply examined and, consequently, considered by ethnic studies researches as negative aspects that aggravate

the already existing stereotypes of the Arab Americans' status. These elements, in fact, can be turned reversibly into positive factors that may help Arab Americans to minimize, and for many, to mitigate the serious psychological effects of discrimination.

1. Social Affiliation: Family

In the Arab and Islamic perspectives, family is considered as a central mechanism and important institution in organizing an individual's life. Practically, an Arab cannot identify himself as an independent unit outside the circles of his/her family. (Dwairy et al., 2006) A survey pursued in the Arab world concluded that national, religious and family identities are more significant than the individual's one. (Harb, 2010)

Unlike the social structure of family in the western world, family importance is a core value shared by all Arab American cultures regardless of nationality and origins. (Erickson & Al-Timimi, 2001) What sociologists refer to as family connectedness and warmth refers to the level of affinity that exists between an individual and his/her family taking into account financial, functional (the role playing), and psychological concerns. Moreover, family affiliation is a source of support that helps in minimizing anxiety and depression and acts as a defensive element against negative psychological effects of discrimination. Examining a sample of South Asian Americans, researchers came to the conclusion that the link between discrimination and psychological pressure is weak if the level of family support is high. (Tummala-Nara et al., 2012) More, role playing, solidarity and family help result in high level of happiness. (Telzer & Fuligni, 2009) Another study showed that Muslim college students who are proud of, and appreciate their culture had lower levels of depression compared to those who did not. (Asvat & Malcarne, 2008)

2. Religious Identity: Religiousness

Before scrutinizing the role played by religious identity in intensifying discrimination and hatred against Arab Americans, one should mention that the definition of religious identity can be define in different ways. The simplest definition that serves the essence of our study is the one which indicates to the levels of one's commitment and devotion to specific beliefs, values, principles, and daily practices of a particular religion.

Positively, religiousness can be advantageous for the Arab Americans in reducing the effects of discrimination and consequently the psychological pressures throughout helping them to gain feelings of inner peace, relaxation, relief, and a sense of meaning. More important, religiousness downplays loneliness, alienation, and negative feelings about the self. (Pargament et al., 1998) After analyzing a sample from Muslim and Christian Palestinians living in Israel, researchers concluded that religiousness is related to many aspects of psychological and moral well being such as the personal worth, self esteem, and constructive social relations. (Abu Rayya, M. & Abu Rayya, H., 2009) Practically,

Bierman added that attending religious service regularly decreases the negative psychological feelings. (2006)

3. Ethnic Identity: Positive Perspectives

Ethnic identity can be described as the mechanism that concerns the ethnic and cultural dimensions of an individual's nature and core. The experience of belonging to certain ethnic group may heighten collective self-esteem, create a feeling of pride, and foster the sense of solidarity and feeling more secure and protected. (Smith & Silva, 2011)

Remarkably, major studies over racial and ethnic groups in the United States shared one conclusion; belongingness to one ethnic group reflects in negative alienation from the American mainstream. However, other studies were keen to prove the opposite. Accordingly, joining certain local and national organizations and associations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Network for Arab American Communities (NNAAC), American-Arab Anti Discrimination Committee (ADC), and others, may enhance the feeling of stable identity and the sense of belonging to apparent communities that are different from the prevailing mainstream. (Smith & Silva, 2011) These organizations play a conceptual role in the creation of an atmosphere of communal entity.

Conclusion

Throughout analyzing the deeply rooted discrimination in the United States and its effects and impact on the Arab American social life and psychological status, this research came to different conclusions. The deep examination of the Arab American psyche, rather than the mainstream American one, resulted in different perspectives.

Generally, levels of discrimination, and necessarily, psychological pressures increase whenever an individual is more devoted to his family, religion, and ethnic groups. By contrast, these elements (social affiliation, levels of religiousness, and the sense of belongingness to an ethnic group) can be turned profoundly into tools to moderate discrimination and decrease the levels of psychological discomfort and weapons against the negative stereotypes of the Arab Americans.

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